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BRIAN BAHOUTH

gonzo station

For seventy-one days we've been steaming in a huge circle in the Indian Ocean, a fictitious place near the equator we call Gonzo Station. Again today the seas are absolutely calm, and every day is the same, windless, sweltering haze. I'm a boiler technician second class on the aircraft carrier *John F. Kennedy* and I'm looking out at the ocean from the place I go to read and think. My private spot is in a recess on the starboard side of the ship where they store the admiral's yacht. The spit shined, forty-foot cabin cruiser is suspended above me on cables and a pair of crane arms that swing out and lower the boat twenty feet down to the water when we're in port. My ass has burnished a spot in the diamond plate steel, and my feet have slowly pressed grooves in the lowest of three, inch-thick cables that form a railing between me and the ocean, and today I must be lacking sleep because I feel especially trapped and hopeless with eighty-eight more days at sea until we drop anchor off the coast of Mombasa, Kenya.

No matter how often or how long I sit here and read or think about the past or the future, my thoughts always return to the haze-gray universe of the ship. My consciousness is inevitably an unconditional prisoner to the ocean and a clock driven system of bells, announcements and feedings. I live in the space of a phone booth, and my free will is gone. No amount of reading or cribbage or poker or jerking

off or staring at the ocean or watching planes take off and land can satisfy my need for at least the illusion of variety and choice.

I repair and maintain the automatic controls that regulate pressures and temperatures in the ship's power plant. The electro pneumatic systems I have committed to memory ensure all eight boilers automatically maintain enough steam pressure to propel the mighty *Kennedy* through the water at forty knots while at the same time charging the aircraft catapults with steam and generating enough electricity and fresh water to service a small city. To maintain our combat readiness, every crew member stands an operational watch of one kind or another, and I must now leave my quiet spot under the admiral's boat because from 16:00 to 20:00 this evening I will be the Automatic Combustion Control technician on call. That means I stay in our shop rebuilding components or calibrating gages or out on trouble calls, and as soon as I enter the shop, the phone is ringing, and the Engineering Officer of the Watch tells me pressure relief valves are lifting in the galley and all over the ship. We use low pressure steam to warm food and do the laundry, and miles and miles of half inch copper piping make an intricate system of metal veins and capillaries charged with steam for radiators and hot water heaters; and without looking at a diagram I strap on my tool belt and head to #2 Fire Room where I am certain the automatic service steam reducing valve is on the blink.

The airtight door of #2 Fire Room opens on a harsh environment where a pair of boilers the size of dormitories vibrate with the roar of force draft combustion, and large lethal machinery is everywhere. A tiny leak in a superheated steam line can cut off your

arm and cauterize the wound in one event. On the way down the steep aluminum ladders past pipes and tanks neatly covered in smooth white lagging, I think back to a month ago when we had a barbecue on the flight deck. The Captain made special dispensation for our extended time at sea, and we each got two cans of beer, but now after five more weeks on Gonzo Station, and months more to go, memory of those beers is a torture, and I would punch my grandmother in the face for a cold beer and a stroll around a city with shops and restaurants and libraries, smells and colors and options to pursue or not. I wave to the Boiler Technician of the Watch through the control room window and then go backwards down the ladder to the lower level, the very bottom of the ship.

And as suspected the steam reducing valve is stuck in a bad loop and cycling open and closed in rapid succession, and every time it opens, the downstream pipe shudders, and the ship's vast web of leaky copper piping is jolted with way too much pressure and probably rattles loud enough to be heard by a submarine. The delicate cams, levers and bellows of the machine that controls the pressure reducing valve are in a small metal box on the bulkhead, so I remove the cover, and something in a zip-lock plastic bag drops into my hand, and the valve stops cycling. Inside the bag is what looks and smells like a couple ounces of high quality hashish. The ship-wide tremors have subsided, and I tuck the hash into my pocket and refasten the cover, and using the phone in the control booth, I tell the Engineering Officer of the Watch the problem has been solved.

MARTIN BARKLEY

employee handbook

Hendrix recalled in his statement that he had started work as a laborer five months earlier in a factory that made personal computers, work for which he had no background, but the temporary agency hired him anyway. Having a month's experience already, Lee was supposed to train him on the esoteric use of the suction hoist. Instead, he just stood there, grinning at Hendrix, while the rest of the production line waited for them to pull their heads out.

The suction hoist dangled from the ceiling like an elephant's trunk, but with the vacuum turned on it hissed like a python. It was probably easier to use than it looked, though. Hendrix wanted reassurance along these lines from his mentor and co-worker, but Lee just kept on grinning at him, and made no attempt to move the training forward.

"Come *on*," somebody from the kitting crew moaned. How hard could it be to work the hoist anyway? After all, this was temp labor; that's why the agency hired just about anyone. A high school dropout or even a functioning idiot could do this job.

Maybe Lee was staring him down because he saw this prep line as *his*, and he was prepared to prove it, by making sure this runty cracker failed at a simple task. Which perception—Hendrix later agreed with Lee—could've just been unfounded racial fear kicking in; even then, Hendrix considered the possibility. Lee was a large man, standing six-foot-two and

weighing two-eighty, a looming physical presence that also wrought havoc on Hendrix's natural fears.

Ignoring the prodding from the kitting crew, Lee said, "Hendrix, I want you to hear it from me. I'm an ex-con and a felon—but I'm not saying for what, so don't ask me. I just want you to know I've put all that behind me now." He added that he didn't drink (anymore) and didn't do drugs (anymore), and that he had even reformed his manner of speaking, which, formerly, he confessed, had been "laced with the vilest profanities."

Flummoxed, Hendrix said, "I thought the temp agency didn't hire felons. That's what they told me."

"Well," Lee said, "I know some people who know some people." He continued to grin, which Hendrix now found less intimidating, since Lee had revealed something so personal. "I'm on parole," Lee clarified. "Work release."

Hendrix should've known if he took on a job as a temporary laborer he'd have to work alongside people with whom he wouldn't usually rub elbows. But, of course, he hadn't thought that far ahead. Taking a job easy to get, he'd rationalized, meant that he wouldn't have a gap in his résumé, but maintaining job continuity wasn't what compelled him to lower his standards. At least Lee had told him the truth about his past; that was more than Hendrix was willing to do.

If he'd possessed the nerve, Hendrix would've told Lee how the loss of his last job had unhinged him. With a seven-year stint of stable employment ended, he'd considered his options—leaping off of Mount Bonnell into the shallow end of the Colorado River being one—and decided to low-ball his prodigious skills in search of wage-paying hourly work. No, he didn't care to apply for salaried mid-management

positions he'd never be hired for again anyway. *Too much experience*, they'd tell him, and he considered that assessment—for reasons other than his professional vitae—as accurate and true. But he couldn't concede that truth out loud to an interviewer, much less to an ex-con.

The truth was Hendrix was burned out. He wanted a place to hide, not a career opportunity, and to the undiscerning eye he'd be just one more shiftless laborer. Which fit precisely the view of the labor pimps, who saw the temp workers as a monochrome array of shitty detritus. No rough diamonds here. Only dirt.

They didn't even ask him why he wanted the job, or what his goals were, or where he thought he'd be in five years. In fact, he'd filled out the application online, which was followed up by an automated phone call informing him that he'd gotten the job. That should've told him what he was in for.

Still, knowing how he'd be treated, Hendrix signed on with the pimps for less than half of what he'd made at his previous job—for eight lousy dollars an hour, to be exact—slinging empty PC boxes down a production line with an African-American ex-con who could dismantle him with a single blow.

Hendrix found he liked the work.

Lee trained him, taught him how to work the suction hoist and keep the prep line moving, and they became friends in the way two men who work together will become friends; that is, without demanding intimate details of each other. Which suited Hendrix just fine. He never saw the need to tell Lee how he came to work in a temporary job and Lee never asked him.

Lyle makes his rounds on the production floor, passing through the prep line and kitting areas. Hendrix calls Lyle “fucking labor pimp”—sometimes to his retreating back, never to his face—and that always makes Lee smile.

Lee says, “Watch it; watch it now, Hen. Don’t be antagonizing that man. He’s gone fire us all soon enough anyway.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“Man, rumors are running up and down the line. But that’s only cause they want us to hear the rumors.”

Hendrix uses the suction hoist to pull the last PC hull from a manufacturer’s crate. Behind him, a forklift driver delivers an unopened crate, while a floating worker, ranging up and down the dock doing trash duty, pushes it off the forks and down rolling casters toward the line.

Competing with the 110-decibel noise on the production floor, Hendrix yells at the forklift driver, “That box was late, we ran out.” Impelled by the stalled line, he opens the cardboard crate, slices off the top folds with a box cutter, then picks up the empty box and hurls it away from the line, nearly hitting the floater. Which precision garners for Hendrix a snarky smile and a middle digit. Hendrix says, “Half-ass slacker. Don’t make me toss the empties. That’s *your* job.”

An LED display mounted at eye-level on the line marks their production thus far: 190 units in the first forty-five minutes. Not a good pace, not good enough, anyway, for Hendrix and Lee, the dynamic duo of chassis prep.

Lee says, “Come on, white, let’s go.”

Ignoring the racial insult, Hendrix focuses on pulling a chassis by its top with the hoist. No

scratches, that's the rule. With precision, he guides the hollow PC case the two feet to the line, where Lee grabs the chassis and places it on a cafeteria tray lined with protective foam. Lee then presses a button to advance the tray to kitting, where a six-woman crew picks the drives, connectors and circuit boards needed to build out the box in the next step down the line.

The noise level on the production floor ratchets down and the line comes to a dead stop. Workers hoot and yell to each other in something like celebration. It's not break or lunchtime, though; it's not even six in the morning yet. But the line is glitchy nowadays, and it stops like this, unexpectedly, all the time. Which hurts the duo's pointless target numbers and, therefore, their pointless performance evaluations.

Hinting at the rumors he's heard, Lee whines, "What I'm gone do now, Hen?"

"You're *not*," Hendrix replies, "going to lapse into Ebonics for me to listen to—that's what you're *not* going to do."

"*Heh heh*," Lee snickers. "Hendrix, you something else, man. I might let you call me the N-word sometime without whooping your ass."

"Sheetit," Hendrix drawls. "That'll be the day."

Out of the doldrums now, Lee says, "Which day would that be, Hen? The day you call me the N-word or the day I whoop your ass?"

"That'd be the same day... Negro."

"*Ha ha ha...*" Lee laughs harder than before. "Cheer up, Hen. Like you said, it's not so bad."

Except Hendrix never said that—would never say that—to Lee: *Cheer up! It's not so bad. Pffffff.*

Destined, he projects, for job-hopping and penury, Hendrix has embraced regular, periodic loss of gainful employment. In fact, he's fond of saying he doesn't really work, even now, for the asshole owners of this place—a fact of which the *law*, the pimps tell him, gives proof by requiring that he work here no longer than nine months without being offered the benefits of full employment. Which will *never* happen. So the factory closing doesn't matter, because they'd be gone anyway. It's only noteworthy that the mid-management a-holes will fire *all* the temps over the last quarter of the year—a few at a time, of course, to prevent a general panic—and good luck filing for unemployment, should a temp worker get fired for cause.

Well acquainted with the satanic art of firing people—having been a mid-management a-hole himself—Hendrix might try to regale Lee with his inside knowledge; that is, if Hendrix believed it'd do any good at all. Hendrix, though, is hard-bitten by predictable, programmed failure, and he finds no cause for encouraging Lee that they'll somehow *be okay* after they're fired. Like shit if they will be: they're essentially fucked, as Hendrix well knows based on experience.

Rubbing his nose, Lee fidgets in the enforced indolence of the stalled production line. They're not supposed to wander off—Lee's been warned, warned again, and then written up—even when the line is idle for long stretches.

Lee sneezes and blows snot in a wide spray. Because his allergies flare up in the factory dust, he has taken a roll of toilet paper from the employee restroom. He pulls off a long string of TP, balls it up in a wad the size of a small pillow, then blows through his flared nostrils hard enough to burst capillaries. His

trumpeting sounds like the blare of a factory fire drill, and all the prep stations around take note and hush for a moment.

“Damn, Lee,” Hendrix says. “You’re gonna bust your eyeballs doing that shit.”

Unfazed, Lee takes the roll of toilet paper, now reduced to a half roll, and says, “Look here, Hen. In federal prison we used to call this a Fifi.”

“A fee-fee,” Hendrix echoes, voicing the cranky incredulity Lee expects of him. “What the fuck is a fee-fee?”

“I’m glad you asked,” Lee says, hawking like a salesman. “Now, as you may know, Fifi is a name for a poodle dog, but it’s also what they call a whore over in France—a Fifi. Anyway, what you do is you pull a condom over a roll of toilet paper, like this.” He pantomimes stretching a condom over the circumference of the roll of toilet paper. “And then you push the dick part of the condom through the tube, like this.” He inserts his ample, fleshy index finger through the cardboard tube, demonstrating penetration. “And then you lube it up with some Vaseline or KY jelly—you know what I’m saying, Hen? That’s what you call a Fifi.”

“Son of a bitch, Lee, I did not need to hear that. I’ll be traumatized clear into next week with that nasty-ass image in my head.”

Lee throws his head back, gives a big belly laugh like a sable Buddha, which gets the notice, once again, of all the other prep stations. No other team has as much fun as Lee and Hendrix do. The other temps call them Batman and Robin, Lee, of course, being the Dark Knight.

They’re short-timers anyway, so why not have some fun while they ponder angst-ridden economic

ruin? Why not transcend rumors and bad news with penile humor?

Such pondering, though, renders in Hendrix the opposite effect, namely, a red-assed fury directed at the impotence he feels to change his and Lee's fate. Hendrix just can't help seeing the connection between Lee's creative method for jacking off and the downtime they face now and in the future. That's all federal prison could offer Lee? Teaching him how to whack off into a toilet paper tube? Hendrix is confused in his politics: he voted for Ronald Reagan twice back in the day, but now he's pretty sure the Repubs don't have his back anymore, if they ever did. Still, his work ethic tells him that a man needs meaningful work, or else he ends up like Lee—with all his strength wasted in empty, pointless onanism.

Hendrix says, "Lee, you've got to take ownership of your work, that's something I can't forget."

Sniffing hard through his swollen sinuses, Lee says, "What're you talking about, Hen? I *do* own it, as much as you do. You know I was just joking around, right?"

With a snapping noise like a switch being thrown, the line starts moving again; the glitch has been repaired. Mingled with guffaws and shouted curses—*Ah shit!*—the deafening racket of the factory floods back over the temps, but Lee and Hendrix go back to work without another word.

After lunch, Lyle comes down out of the air-conditioned office loft overlooking the production floor—to do what? Prod? Cajole? Torture? On any given day, they could never be sure, but there he'd ap-

pear, hovering over Hendrix and Lee as they strained to beat the shop record—on this September day, the target number, plus one—2,058 hulls shat through the dragon's ass in eight hours.

They've switched duties now, with Lee working the suction hoist, mainly because he's better at it than Hendrix, a good-natured point of contention between them. In close quarters the two men have to get along; there is no other option they'd consider. The line is backed up now, loaded full of trays bearing PC hulls to the kitting station. Usually inclined to chatter, the kitting crew works with determined focus to keep up.

Lyle says, "I see you boys got a water bottle on the line. That's a client violation." He's right. No water around electronic parts, that's the rule. But there it is, a bottle of store-bought water sitting on the gray metal shelf below the line.

Hendrix mutters, "If you think you see a *boy* standing here on this line, you can suck his dick."

Drowning out Hen's insubordination, Lee booms, "No boys here, boss, only men. Hard-working men. Men who need a sip of water every now and then."

Multi-tasking, Lee captures a chassis with the suction hoist and passes it to Hendrix, who places it on a tray and then presses the button, with little more than a furtive glance, the bulk of his focus fixed on the temp boss. Lee is snuffling, fighting off a runny nose.

Lyle says, "Well, then, *you go* to the water fountain."

Hendrix takes another hull from Lee, as he weighs in. "You won't let him leave the line. That's a rule, too. You've already warned him twice and written him up once."

“That’s right,” Lyle agrees. “Multiple violations, so he’s fired.” One down, two hundred some-odd to go. Lyle is pleased with himself.

“Look at that count,” says Hendrix, pointing to the LED display above the line. “Well over sixteen hundred. We’re gonna break the record, Lyle. Don’t fire Lee now.”

Lyle says, “He’s gone and, if you say another word, so are you.”

Nestled next to Lee’s sweaty armpit, Hendrix whispers, “Was it murder? Is that why they locked you up, Lee?”

Lee snuffles, grabs for the roll of TP, and goes wide-eyed. “Maybe. Among other charges. Some of them I confessed to; others they still don’t know about. Why you ask me now, Hen?”

“Because I got this one.”

Hendrix takes the next hull from Lee’s hands, steps around the rolling casters bearing unopened crates to line, and sprints to the spot where Lyle stands on the production floor. Roundhousing with the chassis, Hendrix aims for his head. Seeing the danger at hand, Lyle commits the error of turning to run. Which is why Hendrix clipped him square under the nose with the metal hull, the dismantling crunch of cartilage audible, even above the clanging of the line, which now bears away the last remnant of Hendrix and Lee’s work.

SCOTT DOMINIC CARPENTER thrft

While the salesgirl knelt to return the tray of watches to the case behind the counter, Judith slipped a gold necklace off the stand, fingered its textured links, paused, and trickled the fine chain between the flaps of her Dior handbag. Her lips parted and her face flushed with pleasure, as if someone had touched her lengthily in just the right place.

The salesgirl stood and smoothed her skirt over her hips, her eyes brimming with earnestness. Judith almost felt sorry for the poor thing, so keen to earn her commission. Cute, too, and eager to please. Judith liked that about her.

“Anything else I can show you, Ma’am?”

“Not today.” Judith left a pause. “I might consider that diamond one, but I’ll need to speak to my husband.” Husbands could be so useful, in a way. “Why don’t you give me your card, dear?”

As Judith walked away, she felt the salesgirl’s eyes on her back, and she added a touch of sway to her step.

Such a game this was! The department stores held no secrets. The cameras and mirrors insulted one’s intelligence. And store detectives? Please.

Once you knew the layout, it was simple to screen your gestures. Some areas had almost no surveillance. But what was the point of stealing socks and panties? No, the fun came from brushing up against the limit, making valuables disappear like a magician.

Distraction and misdirection, that's what you used. Not to mention the mask of expectations: who'd think that a woman like Judith—who was, after all, someone—would do a thing like this? She hardly needed to sneak.

Down the lingerie aisle Judith spotted an olive-skinned girl in a black knit dress. She was handling a red lace teddy—and had the figure for it. Someone was going to have fun, weren't they? A grubby man, probably—like Judith's husband, who wasn't just a fiction made up for salesgirls. For better or for worse. She even had a little boy that she'd finally unloaded into the school system. Now her days were her own. At first she'd just tried shopping: hats, shoes, bags, scarves... It was too smooth. She'd wanted a bit of friction.

It began with the fitting rooms. In one of the stores, signs were posted: *This room is monitored by same-sex personnel*. Two-way mirrors was how they did it, of that Judith was certain. There were times she could sense the presence on the other side, and on those occasions she undressed slowly, lingering over buttons and zippers, letting her clothing fall to the floor, turning her hips—all the while her eyes on the mirror, watching herself, but also watching them watch her. And then she would reach back and unclasp the strap, slipping the bra off her shoulders. She would cup her hands under her breasts and lift. It wasn't such a bad sight, was it? Why not give them a little pleasure, too? Sometimes she took off the bottom and stood erect, examining herself in the fitting room mirror. Go ahead and *monitor*.

In housewares Judith traced her fingertip along the rim of a china plate. The olive-skinned girl was there again, over by the display of vases, caressed by

that black knit. No denying she was attractive. Their eyes met for an instant, and Judith flashed her the hint of a smile, the acknowledgment of women recrossing paths in a department store. But when the girl's eyes darted away, Judith knew.

All those lustrous curves, wasted on security.

Usually it was men who did this job. Such a clumsy, bumbling lot. Whenever she found them on her tail, she'd lead them around, put on a show of stupid errors, and just when they thought they had her—she could almost feel them getting an erection—she'd slip through their laughable net. Sorry, boys! The best one was last year, uptown, when she dragged that brainless sleuth through a maze of departments after leaving the stolen bracelet inside a sweater she'd considered. At the exit, the brute had clamped his hand on her forearm and dragged her to the manager's office. She gave him the haughtiest look in her stock. When they found nothing on her, the manager dripped with apologies and dressed the fellow down right in front of her. Oh, but she'd relished that—making that man unhand her, taking her pleasure, and not letting him have his.

She paused at the rack of men's ties, trailing the strips of fabric between her fingers. In a slice of mirror she saw that the olive-skinned girl wasn't far behind. A body like that, she could do anything she wanted. And who knows? Perhaps *this* was what she wanted—to watch women like Judith. It was flattering, in a sense. She decided to keep those eyes trained on her a while longer.

As she strolled through the aisles, postponing her departure, Judith prolonged her pleasure. Why rush the moment? In the end, though, they'd both be disappointed. Wouldn't they?

A shiver came upon her. What if she gave the pretty girl what she wanted?

Her heart quickened. She imagined that hand touching her shoulder as she stepped out the door. Judith would struggle a bit—they'd both like that. Those fingers would pick through the intimate packings of her purse. Who knows—maybe she'd be frisked?

Just think what her husband would say.

It would mean risking it all. But wasn't it for this that she'd been waiting? And for such a deliciously long time?

AJ FERGUSON **por la noche**

And to the west, the cane fields sprawl, a sea of perennial grass rising from the black corpse that was once a river. Come the dog days, farmers set fields ablaze for the harvest burn. As he inhales the smoky stench that's seeped into the city, he clenches his jaw, his eyes. Imagining the crunch of ash between each tooth, the undulation of black against a deepening twilight blue; a thin line of fire razes the horizon of his mind.

But his Florida is a midnight trudge alongside slouched toughs long past their season; each adorned with ill-fitting remnants still held dear: wilted scally caps; assault with intent; hard whiskey guts; jeans faded, frayed. They wander from avenue to alley to lane, trekking the line between La Petite Haiti and Little River; they who hail from places with different names that mean the same thing: Vecindades, Tivoli Gardens, Ghost Town, Asbury Park; a diaspora of delinquents—adrift—stomping through the ubiquity of urban sprawl. As shotgun shacks give way to shuttered storefronts, they scan for the hustlers, the crazies, yearning for familiar faces—echoes of home. Fattened by assimilation, this harshness, this scarcity, is comfort food: each of these things its own tautology, its own self-contained truth. Having emerged from an alley, they settle to drink, leaning on chrome and steel while a dance-hall throb grinds

its hips against the neighborhood's hush. They pause between swigs of Red Stripe—as warm as blood—to spit aggrandized narratives; these stories, loaded with Spanglish, larded with half-truths, provide a new mythology, evoked in private patois, *which surely*, only they can understand. Voices rise in the heat only to die out under the distant rim-fire crackle: the burner jams—they exhale—and Dawn Penn wails: no, no, no...

His Florida is a southbound sedan, Salsa blaring, belts screaming, and the needle buried just under where the dial reads 95. We just need to pick: up: more: speed. Lane changes dictated by rhythm alone—drifting east now west—concrete seams strike bald tires to keep a syncopated *son clave* beneath El Rey's timbale chatter: Ran Kan Kan... hands hasten to kill the radio upon reaching the Causeway's crest; the engine noise a lone rebuke to silence. The city slips by as their collective gaze probes the darkness just beyond the neon skyline. Out there, the Caribbean lurks as a vast certainty, farther out than what can be discerned through the night. Then the waiting tunnel, with brackish breath, consumes both light and sound—a muffled moment—before they're disgorged into the rolling riot of plastic and steel that crawls along Collins Avenue; they blink—as though having just plucked coins from their eyes. Alighting on broken pavement, they grip the counter of a coffee stand. While, indifferent to their fading swagger, the hedonistic glamour that is South Beach struts by. The repetition of a grumbled order yields an earnest glare over machine-steam hiss. A reminder: one waits for café con leche on Cuban time. They speak softer now, voices hoarse from laughter; a weary cough, five digits of a phone

number, then they're swallowed by the throng. Once sure the crew is gone, he extracts his last cigarette, lights it, and exhales through blackened fingers, pocked, powder-burn-raw. His gaze pried upward, wary of the faint light that now bleeds across the sky.

And to the east, the Atlantic lays a summer lake—producing tiny, sullen waves that grasp at the shore. While deep within the city grid, August's swelter settles in. As the street's traffic, an ersatz sigh, pushes him further out and into sleep: a constellation of pixilated hammerheads descends into the throbbing darkness beneath his eyes: a school of silhouettes trace circles within the sea of thermal noise just as they did before the test patterns appeared.

F. DIANNE HARRIS

poison girl

Mother and daughter pose for a photograph on the front porch of a white frame cottage, the steps partially obscured by a cypress laden with berries. Mommy told her the berries are poison. "Only birds can eat them."

"Squirrels?"

"Maybe, but not dogs and cats and definitely not little girls."

But when no one was looking, she picked one of the waxy blue-green spiked balls and rubbed it with her finger. The berry became greener as the white coating disappeared. She swallowed it whole and felt the spikes slide down her throat. When nothing happened, she tried another.

Maybe she would die later after dinner or during story hour. Or in her sleep after prayers.

Now I lay me down to sleep, I give the Lord my soul to keep, If I should die before I wake, I give the Lord my soul to take.

Whatever happens, she will never tell anyone she ate the poison berries. After breakfast, she picked a handful, which she now rubs together in the pocket of her navy-blue corduroy overalls. She rolls them between her fingers, feels the spikes, and counts them silently one by one. There are four: one for each year of her life.

Mommy wears a white suit with a filmy scarf tucked in the neckline. She touches her wide-brimmed

hat and rests her other hand on her daughter's shoulder. The daughter feels her touch and looks up to see a half-smile flicker across her painted lips but her eyes look sad.

Daddy leans over the tripod as he focuses the lens. He doesn't live with Mommy and her. And now they live with Mammaw and Pappaw, Mommy's parents. She thinks Daddy lives with his parents, too, but she isn't sure because she never sees him when she visits there.

"Smile, Princess," he says. "Look at the camera. And take those pretty little hands out of your pockets."

She tilts her head and screws up her face into what she thinks is a smile. The fingers of her outstretched hand uncurl delicately towards the camera as she offers him a berry.

JOHN H. MAHER

brazos

The last time Trent saw his father he was leaving for Texas in the family minivan with his grandmother's coffin in the back.

It had been a thing long deliberated over. He had read *Lonesome Dove* in high school and remembered the painful dryness of the prose as one ex-lawman dragged the corpse of another from Montana back to South Texas for burial. His grandmother had wanted to return to Texas herself—she'd lived there for over half her life and moved up to Chicago to live with her son, Trent's father, when the money was gone. She came to hate herself later for doing so, knowing she would die in Illinois and caring nothing for the place. So Trent had told her he would bring her to Dallas after her death. He just hadn't said how.

He had skipped liberally over the details while planning the trip, though thanks to Mapquest he had the logistics all worked out: South on I-57 through Missouri, tin-roof diners for food, a break in Memphis overnight—sleeping in the car at a roadside truck stop—then on to Dallas to stay with family and prepare for the funeral. Funerary and health laws, however, he fundamentally ignored, and his father had told him he was lucky the undertakers' unions hadn't heard about the fiasco.

He was a bit down on the idea, Trent's father, but he felt obliged to humor his son. He had, after all, been the one to introduce Trent to *Lonesome*

Dove—both the book and the TV show—and also to Cather and McCarthy, to *Shane* and the *Dollars* trilogy and practically everything John Ford or Clint Eastwood had ever been involved with. He never tired of reminding Trent of his blue-blooded and lone-starred history—that he was a seventh-generation Texan, that his great-great-and-so-on grandfather had signed the Texas Declaration of Independence, that he was kin to American barons, oil and otherwise, his great-uncle Lamar Hunt having coined the term Super Bowl, you know, and there was some connection to the Cowboys, too. However he felt about Trent's idea, he had to feel committed now, or at least vaguely responsible, imperfect as the plan was.

And it was imperfect, of course Trent knew that. The voyage of Call with his mule and cart, and of Gus's body wrapped in linen weathering winter on the Great Plains and the sun of the New Mexican *llanos*—hot as Hades, his father would say—was more a thing of legend than anything Trent or 21st-century America could dream up. But he couldn't fight the throbbing itch of desire that rose in his shoulder blades when he remembered her last words to him: You're bringing me back to Texas? Well. Heck of a deal.

While he was packing for the trip he thought of his father. He had refused to join Trent on the ride, or even to go to the funeral. He was sick of shouldering the burdens of the woman who should have shouldered his, he said. Showed barely any remorse even at her death. Trent rummaged through his drawers, found a few pairs of boxers and socks and tossed them in his duffel. He couldn't understand his father's apathy. He knew that the two had once been close, and if Trent had had to bury his mother—well, he wouldn't have callously tossed her away.

And Trent had told him as much, just after the call came from the hospital. His father's reply was bitter, curt.

You didn't live with her. You've never lived with her. She's not a parent and never was—wasn't built for it. The only things she's ever paid any attention to were painkillers and Jesus.

But Dad, she loved you.

No. She loved Jesus. God was the only thing she ever loved.

Trent added a few t-shirts to the bag and laid his funeral suit in its garment bag next to it. He found himself staring at the photo of his own mother. He pulled it from the frame on his desk and looked at it for a moment. Short curls of brown hair, an upward turn in the nose, a few freckles falling onto her cheeks. Her green eyes bore into Trent's chest. She reminded him of his grandmother then, though they looked nothing alike—it was just that they were both dead. And he, Trent, who had his father's ears and his mother's everything else, was alive, and would bring his grandmother home. He put the photo in his wallet and added a bar of soap and a toothbrush to his bag, some Arm & Hammer toothpaste, and brought his bags downstairs to place in the back of the van next to his grandmother's coffin.

She had died at ninety-four in the middle days of June and the green country of early Illinois summer shone on as he dreamed at the wheel. He had been to Texas a few times while visiting family, but now he felt as if he had never been there, as if no one had. He thought again of the pride his father had in their Texan heritage, but Trent felt less like the many-greats-grandson of a man best friends with Sam Houston than like Sam Houston himself. His was an

odyssey founded on charity: he was bringing a woman to rest forever at home. The bigness of the thing consumed him.

He remembered a story his grandmother would tell him every time the news was on and they were running something on the Iraq War. She told him about his grandfather, a captain in the Marines who fought at the Chosin Reservoir in Korea and dragged the body of his best friend eighty miles back to the sea to be brought home for burial. His grandfather committed suicide a few years later while they were living in Long Beach, California. His father, not even ten at the time, was devastated, but his grandmother knew that the shellshock—funny, what they called it then—would have taken her husband one way or another. If it hadn't been the shotgun, it would have been drink.

It made an odd sort of sense to him, then, his father's apathy. A loss that jarring at such a young age and a mother who was unable to prevent it, who ignored him from then on in favor of odd jobs and her own coping mechanisms. It was illogical, but pitiable—maybe even forgivable. It wasn't as if Trent felt any differently about his own father.

He hadn't even been allowed to attend his mother's funeral. The defense was that he was too young. And at three years old, he was—Trent could admit that. He was verbal, sure, but certainly incapable of understanding what it meant to lose a parent, and even less capable of sitting through the ceremony—gilded priests laying hands on the grieving, waving pale hands over silver cups as if their motions to a dead god mattered, as if they could heal the pains of the living or the bodies of the dead. But the facts were these: Trent was with his grandmother and his father wasn't, and as Trent could not even begin to

understand that kind of callousness, it was inevitable that he would hate him for it.

By the time he hit East Texas he had dreamed through the entire ride, Memphis and diners and all. He had forgotten to stop at Graceland, forgotten even to turn the Paul Simon album on once he hit the Tennessee border. He was thinking of miles now. Almost a thousand, this journey—nearly one third of the distance across the country. The land was swimming in summer heat before him and he knew he had to rest. He pulled to a stop just west of Texarkana and slept for ten hours.

He woke as the sun was setting on the corrugated roof of the Vaquero Diner. He locked the car and walked in. The floor was charred, the counter chipped and perpetually soiled. A lone waitress rubbed at the wood with a bleached rag and sipped at a highball glass. The ceiling fan hummed.

What'll y'all have?

Burger, medium rare, fried egg and cheddar. Grits. Side of hot sauce. Coffee.

Nine-eighty, honey.

Trent felt around in his pocket and placed the crumpled bills and warm coin on the counter. The waitress disappeared round back, presumably to make his food. Trent pulled out his pocketknife and began idly chipping away at the counter.

That wood ain't gonna fix itself after you go cuttin it, honey.

He jumped. Where the hell had she come from? She put the dish down in front of him and slipped the money into her apron.

Sorry, he muttered, putting the knife back into his pocket.

She smiled. So, where ya goin?

Sorry?

No need to be sorry. I was only askin where you're goin.

Trent smiled and looked her over. She wasn't much older than him, probably. Curled blond hair, neck length. Green eyes sat brightly in a pale face.

Dallas. For a funeral.

Whose? Yours?

My grandmother's.

A sad smile at that. Dust to dust, she said, brushing Trent's hand lightly with her own. She pursed her lips.

Let me know if I can get you anything else at all.

He ate in minutes and left with a beer for the road. Chips of gravel popped off the asphalt as he wove the van around Budweiser trucks and the occasional station wagon. He wished then that his minivan were a pickup or something a real Southerner would drive. He started thinking of some lyrics to a song a friend played for him in college while they were high, but realized that he had forgotten them. He began humming to the tune of the wheels.

By sunrise he was nearing Dallas but impulsively changed roads. He would get her to Dallas, like he promised, but he had to see what those cowboys had seen. He stopped at a gun store and looked around, thinking of buying a pistol—this was not much of a problem in Texas—but decided against it and returned to the car. As he jumped into the front seat, his cellphone began to ring from inside the dash. He ignored it. His father would be wanting him, but he didn't want to be wanted. He sat immobile in the

front seat until he fell asleep and slept until midday. When he woke, he became aware for the first time of the odd smell coming from the back of the van, but decided not to think about it. Trent turned the nose of the car southwest and drove on. He let his eyes follow the sun.

He stopped a few miles southeast of Waco and drove out to the Brazos River. He opened the trunk of the car and sat on the edge of the coffin and felt himself covered by the orange blush of the sky. The sun sank into the horizon, a blood-red communion wafer hovering over the cup. He glanced at the river and then at his hands. He could bury her here if he could only move the coffin—spare himself and her from the false cares of his family and bury her like a cowboy, like a true Texan. But he couldn't.

The sky ripened to the color of a Japanese plum. Trent realized then that this was likely the first Sunday in eighty years that his grandmother had not spent in church. The need to see her again overwhelmed him suddenly, and he rolled himself from the coffin and climbed over it to the side of the trunk looking for the clasps. He was lucky the gasket had yet to be used to seal the thing—the family, like the good Catholics they were, intended to hold an open wake once he reached Dallas. He undid the clasps and pulled the lid from the coffin.

The sight of the newly embalmed still chilled him, despite the wakes he had been to in high school. His grandmother's grey-red hair was sprayed with a stiffener and had been combed up to show the cool jellies of her eyes. The river breeze slunk in through the open trunk to rattle her paper skin, pushing the pronounced blue veins slightly backward. Her forehead suddenly too big for her delicate face and shoulders

just a bit too slender. One breast missing from cancer years ago. Her mouth was curled with a cool smile playing over too-red lips, but the mouth was betrayed by her eyes. In life, she believed the warm hand of God waited to caress her in death and carry her to her husband. Trent looked again at her eyes and doubted it.

He felt his stomach inching warmly into his throat and opened the door to vomit. The taste lingered as he began pulling her body slowly from the casket and lowered her to the ground. He didn't know why he did it—maybe he wanted to see her on her feet again, hold her, feel some vague sense of what teenagers and Hollywood called closure. Trent struggled with her weight—wasn't she only ninety-five pounds when she died? But he would not drag her, and after a few minutes succeeded in curling his arms around her back. He made his way down to the river with her body curving toward the grass.

He had yet to come this close to the water. Bony slivers of swamp cypress skimmed the skin of the river and purple whispers left in the wake of the downed sun curled around ripples made by small-mouths. A shiner slipped its lip above the surface and grabbed the tail of a dragonfly, pulling it under. Trent pressed the balls of his feet into the mud and moved toward a rock by the water's edge. About halfway down the slope he slipped and dug his heels into the earth to stymie his fall but couldn't. He turned to the right to lessen the impact and fell on his right side, letting his grandmother's body slip from his grasp and shoot down the muddy hill toward the rock. His eyes were covered with mud. He frantically attempted to right himself until he heard the thud of flesh hitting rock. He relaxed a bit, then. At least she wouldn't float off to the Gulf of Mexico.

Thumm.

What was that? The trunk? He turned back toward the van, but slipped again.

Cleck-cleck—

krrrrrr-ummmmmmmmm.

The engine of the car began to chug. Had he been that stupid? To leave the keys—

Zzzzzzzzzzzzrrrrrrreeeoouooooohhhmmmmmm.

Trent sprinted toward the van, slipping again in the mud. When he finally reached the peak of the hill he could hear nothing but the mockingbirds cooing to the winds. Wheel grooves laced their way through the mud and off toward the road.

He stared at the ground. The van was gone, and with it his clothes, his phone, his grandmother's coffin. Ashamed, he sat down in the mud and allowed himself finally to cry for her.

Hours passed, and Trent remained sitting in the ruts left by the wheels. He thought of Woodrow Call, then, Woodrow F. Call, with Augustus's body laid gently in a cairn by the river, the marker of his grave reading nothing but a misinscribed Latin truism. *Uva Uvam Vivendo Varia Fit*—roughly, a grape is changed by living with other grapes. He thought for a moment of his father, then shook the image from his head.

It was done, then. Where could he take her but here? He could not carry her. He had barely been able to take her to the river. He pushed himself up from the dirt and carefully made his way back down the riverbank. The body lay looped around a rock by the river's edge. Trent bent down to brush the mud off her face. Her eyes were still open. One blue orb rolled back into the unfeeling bone behind it. He vomited again, then pushed his own back up against the rock and stared into the midnight waters of the river.

The next morning Trent woke with the sun and washed in the Brazos to rid him of the mud. He took water in his cupped hands and carried it to his grandmother, washing her slowly. When he had finished, he took her in his arms again and brought her to a cluster of black cypress trees about two hundred feet downriver. He found a wide flat rock and began to dig. It took him almost half the day. Once the hole was finished, he grabbed her body and lowered it into the earth.

It took him another hour or so to cover the body with the displaced dirt from the grave and to cover that with riverbed rocks. The cairn was rough but good—it covered her fully, and was barely noticeable from even fifteen feet away. Trent knelt by the side of the cairn for a moment to catch his breath. He thought of his father, then, though he did not know why.

Trent made his way to the highway and hitchhiked to Waco, where he grabbed some lunch and reported the stolen vehicle to the police. He thought he'd have trouble explaining the coffin, but the officers barely registered the information. They asked where he'd be staying, and he gave them his father's number.

When he left the station, he walked from Waco back down to his grandmother's cairn. It was a good few miles, and by the time he reached the cypress grove the sun was reddening in the sky. He sat at the river's edge and watched the reflection of clouds darken on the water. After a minute he turned to the grave and laughed.

Well, I got you here, didn't I? he said to the stones. Heck of a deal.

ZANA PREVITI bug bar

I have everything. Repellents the scent of honeysuckle; repellents made from juice squeezed from the stingers of killer bees and from the venom of Amazonian snakes. Repellents in lotions, aerosol sprays, concentrated oils, magnetized bracelets, enchanted glass marbles designed to be clasped tightly in the left hand. Repellents mixed specifically for pregnant women, repellents for children with learning disabilities, repellents for bearded fathers and knob-kneed bachelors, repellents for Eastern Europeans and for active members of the military.

A limitless and diverse stock of insect repellent. I, as bartender: expert-level knowledge of the subtleties of those repellents. Near-supernatural understanding of the repelling needs of the individual.

It is summertime in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, land of rolling fields dotted with baled hay. We are infested; they have descended. Barefoot bandana-ed hippies buy maple soda for their dirty children at the Hardwick Farmer's Market, held in the triangle of grass across from the Ford dealership. In the woods, teenage boys stand upright and halloo on their ATVs. I drive winding empty roads, the smell of manure in the sun.

When the hurricane ripped through the state earlier this summer, it patted our heads with cold rain and halfhearted wind and concentrated on washing away the trailer parks of southern Vermont.

The mosquitoes are brutal.
The black flies are the size of grapes.

Susan is six feet tall and nine months pregnant. When she eats apples, I can see the outline of a small foot pressing upwards. It is visible through the blue cotton of her tee-shirt. She wears a men's Large. My wife is gigantic. She cannot eat a meal without dropping food on her belly. I buy six-packs of teeshirts at the Family Dollar.

He loves apples, she writes on a pad of yellow graph paper.

This one is an elderly woman. She is dressed in purple, with purple gems hanging from the long lobes of her ears. She has thin white arms like brittle snowy branches; she stretched them out to me and the insides of her wrists are scrolled with purple veins. I crush two Doc Bonner's PestEscape! Tablets between my fingers and dab the oil inside her elbows. It will last for hours. She's going to an outdoor play, she tells me. A long one. Shakespeare, she says, and looks back to her car as if the droop-faced man inside can hear her.

Often, they don't say a word to me; they hold out their wrists and close their eyes, incline their heads backwards and strain away. I apply repellent and when they open their eyes, I point to my price board. They leave the money on the table, and walk back across the grass to their cars. They are going kayaking, maybe. Or maybe they are planning to drive to

Newport, untie their bicycles from the backs of their SUVs, and pedal the dirt path along the lake to Canada, where they will be greeted by a sign in French; they will take a picture, maybe, there, and then—passportless—will walk their bikes around and ride the way back.

Everyone will be doused in something to keep the bugs away. Later, no one will itch their ankles. No one will hold out their arm and marvel at the immense size, immense redness of the welt there.

The day after we found out, Susan took a vow of silence. To better commune with the baby. She writes me notes, what she wants to say, on a pad of yellow graph paper she bought in Turkey. We are kind of like pen pals, now, except that we see each other five out of the seven days of the week. On the weekends she visits her mother in Maine. They eat chocolate covered cherries and shop for baby things at thrift stores. I work at the Bug Bar and call her when I get home. I chatter to the silence. How's our little man, I ask, and I can hear the change in the silence as she passes the phone to her belly. I hear him turn somersaults.

It's seasonal work. In the truck I keep an EZ-Up tent, a folding plastic table, and nine plastic milk crates filled with my repellents. I set up before dawn, just off the exit so that cars can see me and far enough so that they've slowed down enough to pull over. Susan hand-painted the sign on plywood.

B U G B A R, it says.

I keep chains and rope in the truck, as folks tend to get stuck in the mud of the field after a heavy rain.

My wife hasn't spoken to me in thirty-six weeks. At the Price Chopper, she pretends to be deaf. She learned signing, enough to get by.

Thank you, she can sign, and she cups one of her hands into the other below her chin.

It's a boy, she can sign, when people ask. Thank you.

I love you, she can sign, but that's an easy one. She knew it before. So did I, but I didn't know that it was sign language.

The tourists come here to buy Pure Vermont Maple Syrup. They come here to buy ceramic moose that they will hang on their Christmas trees in the winter. They come here to buy cheese made from our local goats' milk, our local cows' milk. They come here to buy small wool caps, knitted to resemble the tops of strawberries, pumpkins, eggplants, for their toddler children. "You like it? We bought it in Vermont. It's fun," they'll say, and smile indulgently at their child. They have coffee mugs hanging in their kitchen cabinets that proclaim ILOVERMONT. There will be a heart where the first "O" should go.

They do not call themselves "tourists." They call themselves "seasonal residents."

They all hate the bugs. They hate being sweaty, swatting at themselves, dotting themselves in calamine lotion. They'll pay a lot for a quality repellent.

Last summer, her mother took her on a trip to Turkey. As souvenirs, Susan brought back three pairs of droopy Turkish pants, and graph paper.

Güçlü Alt Kapak
A5 (21* 14.8cm)
Renkli Kagit
120 yaprak kareli
Perforajlı yapraklar

She has a pen with a very fine point. Each letter fits into one square; between words she leaves one square blank; punctuation, too, gets its own square. We are five sheets from the end of the pad.

What'll we do when we reach the end, I ask her.
That's when he'll come, she writes.

Our neighbors Scott and Andrea walk down the road and bring us surplus from their garden; if we are not home, they let themselves in our back door and leave vegetables on our kitchen table. We come home to a pile of gigantic, swollen tomatoes, bulging and bizarrely shaped.

On the graph paper, she writes, *This one looks like a heart*. She holds up a tomato the size of a man's fist. I look at it and say to her, It looks nothing like a heart. No, she writes, *not a Valentine heart. A human heart*. I look again. It does.

Our local newspaper is called *The Kingdom Gazette*. We've been subscribers since we were married. Last week's headline was "Glover Fire Department Gets New Stove." There was a photo: black and white, two men and two women posed around the new stove, beaming.

A woman with hair like gold visits the Bug Bar on a day so hot I can feel the sun sweat. I have a cooler full of ice that I hold on the back of my neck. Her hair is knotted into two long braids. She drives a Jeep, and there is a dirty Rottweiler sitting up and panting in the back.

Bugs are okay, she says, leaning onto my plastic table. Her fingernails are so thick with dirt that I want to reach out and clean them with my knife. She says, I don't mind the bugs. But I'm burning, she says, right here. And she nods her head forward: I see the place on her skull where the hair has been parted has turned a bright cherry red. She straightens up again. Her face is flushed, ruddy, smiling; she looks as though she should be churning butter, in a gingham dress, in a television commercial.

I don't have sunscreen, I say, just insect repellent.

Let 'em come, she says. She turns and walks back to her Jeep. But before she reaches it she pauses and holds her arms out, lifts her face to the sun and says, cries out, really: All aboard! And then she gets in her car and she drives away, not into town but away from it, into the mountains.

We are two sheets from the end of the Turkish graph paper. His due date was last Tuesday.

THE APPLES ARE OUT HERE, I say, loudly, so that he can hear. YOU HAVE TO COME OUT HERE TO GET THEM. She throws her head back and waggles the fingers of both hands, the sign language equivalent of laughing.

The last time I heard my wife speak was forty-one weeks ago, at the Montpelier Co-op. She held out the small plastic bag; I spooned curry powder into it. We had been arguing for an hour, in the truck, about her vow of silence. Later that night we would sauté zucchini and onions and broccoli in peanut oil and curry powder. Later that night we would eat the curried zucchini and onions and broccoli on the back porch at a white plastic patio table we had found at Goodwill, and we would watch the sky blister up red. The next day the hurricane would come and we would get rained on, hard, but nothing bad would happen.

She had twisted the plastic bag closed. I wrote the price on a white sticker, and handed it to her. She had taken it so that it stuck on the end of her index finger and she held it up like a flame. She had said, Okay. Are you ready?

And then she didn't speak again.

At the Bug Bar, there is no cell reception. When she goes into labor, I do not know for over an hour, when Andrea comes tearing down the local road and swerves onto the field. She is driving Susan's car, so I know.

I leave the repellent on the table, I look around for something to take with me. Surely, I need something. I need to be prepared; I have no time, no time at all to do the thousand things left undone. I leave everything. I leave the repellent, the milk crates, the EZ-Up, the money in the cashbox, my truck with the keys in the ignition. I leave it all behind. I run to where Andrea is frantically waving at me, Get in, get in, get in, she yells.

At the hospital, labor is long. She is not on the bed, as I had imagined it, but pacing along the hallway in a pink cotton gown. She pauses and beckons me over; I bring the graph paper and her pen. We have one half of one page left.

Run over to the store and get some chips and salsa, she writes, for after, when everybody comes.

Right now? I ask her.

She nods. She puts her hand with the pen out again and writes, *Get a lot.*

Her handwriting has changed.

At the Price Chopper, I stand in the chip and nut aisle with a red plastic basket and I say out loud, My son is being born, and I am at Price Chopper.

When I am done saying it, it is still true. I get the good tortilla chips, the ones that taste like salt and lime, the ones we cannot afford.

When I return to her room in the hospital she is not there; I run until I find her. She looks angry; her body twists in terrible significance. I feel my face, I touch the bed and I touch her hair, I put my hands on everything I can reach.

Where have you been, she shouts at me. She throws her head backward so that the small fragile bones of her neck are exposed; people are speaking in the room but I cannot make out what they are saying; I am watching, I am trying to be in the room, I am trying to feel as though this is, in fact, my life that I am right now fighting to breathe inside, to put my hands on something.

She makes a sound, like a laugh.

And then he is here, and we have him.

It is the end of the summer. The bedroom window is open and the breeze is chilly.

Shut the window, she says, and I do. I have many things to do. Tomorrow afternoon I will drive into Newport and go to the Pick & Shovel to buy bolts, to fix the front porch. On Saturday I need to trim the dead branches off the beech that fell in the hurricane; if it's rainy on Sunday, we'll burn.

My wife is six feet tall and her breasts are enormous. My son eats insatiably. When I am home I read to him so that he will be smart. We are reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. I never read it. It's pretty good.

Susan's mother found a pair of Carhartt overalls at a thrift store that should fit him in a couple months.

When he is old enough, he can ride in my lap on the tractor.

My wife cleans out the bag she had taken to the hospital. Look, she says, showing me the graph paper. There is still some space left, she said.

Yes, I reply. There is.

There was a killing frost last night. I drive past the field where the Bug Bar used to be. I pull over three miles past, and I turn around. I park in the field which has hardened in the cold but I leave the engine running. The sun is just beginning to rise; as I watch, the field begins to exhale. Blue colored wafts of something—dew, cold, the spirit world—curl upward from the grass and turn pink before they reach the height of a man and disappear. The White Mountains are black and sharp-tipped in the east.

It's cold. After a while, I turn the engine off. I put my hands on the steering wheel because it's there, and because I can reach it. All the bugs are dead.

ELIZABETH HELEN SPENCER

the permanence of objects

For John R. MacKay

Vincent first felt the glow of distinction at age eight. As the only third grader cast in the Thanksgiving play, he portrayed Massasoit, chief of the Pokanoket tribe and ambassador to the newly arrived pilgrims. While the other boys strutted across the stage, their characters merely conduits for masculine bravado, Vincent played Massasoit with slow, deliberate steps and a tight-lipped mask of pain. Everyone thought the pilgrims and Indians were friends, but Vincent knew better. He knew Massasoit was being used. The pilgrims' invitation of friendship was false, just as Vincent's classmates would ask him to play tag but never tag him.

Vincent's grandmother was the only relative who saw *The First Thanksgiving*. While his mother cooked for the following day's feast and his father worked a graveyard shift, Myra drove Vincent to the school, put blush on his cheeks, and straightened his headdress. She sat in the front row and roused the audience to a standing ovation. Ten years later, after Vincent's parents were killed in a car accident, Myra told him about her own history as an actress, a secret past that no one in the family knew of. Her parents thought that acting was hardly better than prostitution, so her career began and ended with a local production of *Our Town*.

“It will happen fast now,” said the nurse, Karen. A week ago Myra left the hospital to die at home in Hamilton, New Jersey. Now her morphine dose would be doubled and it was supposed to be a blessing. *You’re putting my grandmother to sleep like an old dog*, Vincent wanted to shout, but Karen was too patient to yell at. When she turned Myra over twice a day, Karen whispered soothingly in a loving tone Vincent imagined her using with her own mother.

Every day Vincent described the view for his grandmother. He told her about the blue sky, the cotton ball clouds, and the remaining summer flowers in her yard. He told her that all the squirrels had gotten fat in spite of chasing each other up and down the large dogwood. He wanted Myra to imagine the kind of perfection that people who believe in heaven hope to find when they get there.

The leaves needed raking, but Vincent didn’t tell her that. Even after he moved in, Myra had insisted on paying the neighborhood kids to do yard work. They spent more time jumping in the leaves than raking them, but Myra believed in hard work and fresh air. She tried to encourage in the local children—as she had in Vincent—the robustness of her own childhood.

Vincent squirmed in his chair, stretching his legs. As he stood up he sensed more than heard that Myra’s shallow breaths were growing farther apart. He looked around the room, imprinting on his memory the exact arrangement of furniture and objects. After Myra died, the room would freeze like a museum display and then everything would be distributed: the jewelry to granddaughters, the antique writing desk to one son, the grandfather clock to another. The things that most reminded Vincent of his grandmother—the aloe plant on the windowsill, her elegant

cursive, the dining room's water-stained green and pink flowered wall paper—weren't willed to anyone.

There was no one for Vincent to consult, no one to share with him this helpless watching. Karen wasn't due for another hour. The rest of the family had been in and out over the last week, but it was too late to call them back.

Vincent held Myra's hand and kissed her forehead, her skin dry and smelling of illness—a sour odor like a warning to the healthy. It had been minutes since she'd taken a breath. Vincent slid his hand down her palm to her wrist, searching out a pulse. He watched her chest, waiting for her lungs to move, and the perfect stillness of her body played tricks on his eyes. He saw her chest rise even though she didn't have a heartbeat. Where are you going, he thought.

Vincent waited, but his grandmother was gone. Her body was made of living cells that would decay. The body didn't have the permanence of objects. Vincent wondered if he should call 911 or wait for Karen to arrive. Was a dead person an emergency?

Five years ago Vincent, then thirty, had moved in with Myra. In exchange for room and board he cared for her and for the house, but he also temped in the corporate parks lining Route One. Without the expense of a car it was easy to save a little each month. Myra never planned to leave the house to Vincent because they both knew he couldn't afford the mortgage. It would go to her son, John, the executor of her estate. Vincent assumed he would have enough in the bank by the time she died to rent an apartment in Trenton or Philadelphia.

Then Wall Street hemorrhaged and the pharma company Vincent scanned documents for let all its temps go. He took the layoff as an opportunity to start

auditioning again. Acting had been his dream since he played Massasoit, but he'd always sidelined it when a bad romance or brief attempt at a different career took priority. Now it was clear there would be no other career, no temp gigs for the meantime, and his last girlfriend, Wendy, was a memory two years gone. Vincent rode buses around New Jersey and into Philadelphia to appear on the dusty stages of community theaters and in the shaky frames of film students' digital movies. He did Shakespeare, Stoppard, and "Zombies take Fishtown IV." He was having the time of his life until August of '09, when he came home from rehearsal to find his grandmother lying on the living room floor. She complained of thirst and dizziness, and said there was blood in her urine. Her voice was weak, her words slurred; Vincent thought she'd had a stroke.

One week after Myra's death, her family stood on the beach in Wildwood to scatter her ashes. It had been her favorite place, the site of many family vacations. Vincent's face stung in the wind, creating tears that he wouldn't otherwise have cried. He'd felt numb all week, but small things were important to him, such as infusing his own portion of the ash dispersal with purpose. John had asked the funeral home to divide the ashes so they wouldn't have to grab handfuls from an urn like it was a bowl of popcorn. Vincent dipped a finger into his bag of ashes and it came out covered in gray flakes like the burnt-out end of a cigarette. Then he sunk his hand into the shallow edge of the ocean. Now Myra was the oxygen and carbon that made the water.

Vincent turned the bag of ashes upside down and watched the gray flakes whirl around him, a dirty snow flurry. Myra's great-grandchildren cartwheeled across the sand and ran to the edge of the ocean, shrieking as they plunged their feet into the icy water. Vincent stuffed the empty bag into his pocket and sat on the sand a few feet from the others, who stood in a small circle while John talked about Myra. Vincent didn't want to join in; he wanted to keep his memories private. He closed his eyes until John's voice boomed next to him.

"You got much to pack?"

"That house is filled with stuff," Vincent said.

"Not what I meant."

Vincent stood up and returned John's stare.

"I just thought you'd want to know since it's your problem now. I have my duffel bag."

"You've always been a little fucker," John said, lowering his voice so the rest of the family wouldn't hear him. "You clung to Mom like a barnacle for years, hoping she'd give you the house. But you're a loser, just like your father."

Vincent looked at the rest of his relatives, most of whom he hadn't seen since his parents' funeral. They were a close family—everyone lived in New Jersey and gathered all over the state for holidays and celebrations. When Vincent moved in with Myra, her children stopped visiting as regularly, but would occasionally pick her up and drive her to someone's house for a meal. Vincent was never invited.

His mother told him once that her family had never liked Vincent's father because he was from West Virginia and had been between jobs when they married. One Christmas Eve when he was five, Vincent heard Uncle John, his cheeks flushed from too

much beer, call Vincent's father a "god-damn red-neck." For years afterward Vincent studied the necks of everyone he met from West Virginia, expecting a mysterious rash to appear.

"You're a bigger fucker than I am," Vincent said. "I bet you're not even going to live there. Myra would've left it to someone else if she knew you would just sell it. You don't know how much pride she took in her house. You never spent enough time with her to know."

Tina, John's wife, ran up to them.

"You leave him alone," she said to her husband.

Tina was steel-willed enough to have kept her figure after four children. There was no doubt in Vincent's mind that she was the boss, especially because she was the breadwinner. Her Six Dollar Salon, located on a plum street off the Wildwood boardwalk, must have brought in more than John's unsteady work as a house painter.

Tina gave Vincent a sympathetic look.

"Thank you for taking care of her, sweetie. No one else wanted to do it, so your living with her was a gift to us. You gave us peace of mind, and no matter what he says—" she looked threateningly at John, "—we'll always be grateful. You're welcome to stay there for a while until you arrange something else."

"Thanks, Aunt Tina, but I've already found something else," Vincent said.

From Wildwood, Vincent took the 552 bus to Atlantic City, then the 551 to Camden to catch the Riverline to Trenton. On the first bus, he noticed an elderly woman across the aisle, her white hair short and curly

and half covered by a green felt hat with a bird on the brim. Suddenly he wanted to have a grandmother more than anything else in the world. He hadn't felt orphaned after his parents died—the world of college was busy and exciting enough to make him feel full of life, not drained of it—but now he understood the lost feeling friends described after the death of a parent. Noticing Vincent staring at her, the woman glared at him, hugging the plastic shopping bag on her lap closer to her chest.

From Trenton, Vincent walked five miles to the Hamilton border where Myra's yellow clapboard house stood in its yard as if nothing had changed. He'd lied to Tina about having a place to go—he was still waiting for his dad's brother in Ohio to call him back—but now that the house was John's Vincent didn't want to be in it. He packed in thirty minutes, taking a few items of clothing, a small notebook filled with lists in Myra's handwriting, the ceramic angel she'd asked him to put on her nightstand once she knew she was dying, a scrap of wallpaper from her dining room, and the aloe plant that had soothed his childhood sunburns. Myra had had it twenty-five years, since Vincent was ten, and had expected the plant to outlive her.

Vincent didn't have close friends he could ask for shelter. His ex in Philly was a gamble, but she might let him spend a few nights on her couch. The only child of wealthy parents, Wendy had always been directionless. Vincent met her at the Ritz movie theater when she was a manager there. Three years later a national chain bought the family-owned theaters and drug testing was implemented. Vincent had been trying for a while not to notice that Wendy took more pills than anyone else he knew. She always had an excuse - her

period, a migraine, general anxiety—but when she failed the test and was fired, Vincent could no longer ignore the problem. Her parents offered to pay for rehab but Wendy cut them off, supporting her six-year-old son, Tony, with investments that were already in her name. Vincent had loved Tony, and even after he left he checked in on them once in a while.

During the train ride from Trenton to Philadelphia, Vincent held the aloe plant on his lap. He saw his reflection in the dark window as the train passed through a tunnel: a thin man with a long gray ponytail, stubble, and blue John Lennon sunglasses. Boarding and exiting trains made him feel vulnerable. He checked for his wallet and touched his watch every time he stepped over the gap between platform and train, afraid the few objects he owned would fall onto the tracks.

He got off the subway at Snyder and walked toward Fifth Street, where Wendy lived in a small brick row home. She opened the door in a leopard-print bathrobe, her feet bare. When it was new the bathrobe must've been fuzzy and soft like fleece, but now it was thin and matted. Wendy had cropped her hair and lost weight. She once resembled Winona Ryder, Vincent's longtime celebrity crush, but Wendy was no longer pretty. Vincent studied her for a moment to be sure this was the woman he used to sleep next to.

"What do you want," she said.

Her flat tone was the tone of a woman from whom everyone wanted something and no one gave anything in return.

"I don't have anywhere to go," Vincent said.

"Me either."

She gestured to her bathrobe and lack of shoes.

At least her humor was intact, Vincent thought.

Tony, now nine, appeared behind his mother. He stared at Vincent, then bolted up the stairs, his also-bare feet making a faint slapping sound against the wood. Vincent wondered if the boy recognized him; Tony had always been shy. Before he could ask, Wendy stepped into the house, leaving the door open.

"It's been a long time, Vincent. What're you doing showing up now?"

"My grandmother died. I'm on my way to Ohio, but I need somewhere to crash for a few days."

Wendy looked at the aloe plant cradled in Vincent's right arm.

"Is that your idea of flowers?"

"It was my grandmother's plant."

"Never could say no to you, Vincent, but just a few days. My boyfriend's coming home from a business trip at the end of the week."

In spite of her appearance, Vincent wondered if this new man had inspired sobriety in Wendy. But as soon as he stepped into the house and the stench of cigarettes and unwashed bodies hit him, all thoughts of her changing disappeared. Maybe the boyfriend didn't even exist. The living room was a diorama of chaos with no place to put down his bag. Clothes, toys, and dirty dishes covered the floor. A fat black cat dozed on top of the sofa, elevated above the mess. Now was the time to wish he'd saved more money, picked a career, bought a house somewhere down the crooked line his life had taken.

Wendy showed him to a futon in the basement. In the middle of the night he felt her hands searching his body, stopping only when they landed on his wallet. He opened his eyes. Wendy moaned, acting like she was coming on to him, but her hands didn't move

from his back pocket. Vincent slapped her across the face and jumped to his feet. Grabbing his duffel bag and the aloe plant, he ran up the stairs.

Wearing Spiderman pajamas, Tony was slouched on the couch watching TV. Vincent halted when he saw the boy, his instinct for self-preservation fading to consideration of Tony's well-being. Then Wendy came up behind him.

"You're an abusive asshole," she shrieked. "You hit me. You hit a woman. Abusive. Asshole."

She slapped her palms against his back like she was hitting a Congo drum. Vincent didn't know if she was trying to hurt him or push him out the door. Tony's eyes didn't move from the screen, but Vincent could see his tense body quiver. Vincent turned, deflecting Wendy's blows with his forearms.

"Tony's here," he said.

Wendy lowered her hands and looked at her son. For a moment she and Vincent appeared as they might have been—two parents shamed out of their foolishness into a united concern for their boy. Then reality came back into focus for them both.

"I want you out," Wendy said. "Right now."

Tony slid off the couch and stood beside Vincent. He looked up at his mother, his thin face heart-shaped and full of longing like a construction-paper valentine.

"Why can't Vincent stay?" Tony asked. "I want him to stay."

"No, baby, Jay is going to be your father. We talked about that."

"I like Vincent. I want to play soccer with him tomorrow."

"Vincent's leaving now. Say goodbye. You can play soccer with Jay."

“Will you come back tomorrow?” Tony asked Vincent.

“I can’t, buddy, but it’s not because I don’t want to. I’m sorry.”

Vincent ran his hand over Tony’s head, smoothing down his hair. Carrying his bag and his plant, Vincent left silently and began to walk toward Center City. He would find a bar to sit in until two, then a diner. He would catch the earliest bus to Columbus and hope Jim would take him in. To Vincent, all of South Philly sounded sleepless and despairing—dogs barking in row home backyards, infomercials leaking through thin bedroom windows, people yelling at each other in parked cars. Everyone was having the oldest fight in the world: “You don’t treat me right...”

Vincent was an anomaly in a family of believers. His father’s only brother, Jim, had claimed a shred of Quaker ancestry to avoid Vietnam, but ended up finding real solace in the silent meetinghouses. Once while he was visiting the family, Jim took Vincent to a Sunday meeting. Vincent hadn’t known what to make of the service, where his uncle talked more than anyone else, talked the way a patient talks to a therapist—openly and without expecting a response—the comfort coming from speaking the words out loud.

Jim never married, and for a while Vincent had thought he was a priest. After he retired at age 65 from being an engineer, Jim mentored troubled youths, even letting some of them stay with him. This was probably the only reason he would agree to shelter a nephew he hadn’t seen in twenty years, which made Vincent uncomfortable. Being charity was

something different—something worse in Vincent's mind—than being family.

Jim had sounded put out when Vincent called from the bus.

"I have two boys staying here," he said. "I was waiting for one to leave before bringing you in. My house isn't large, you see, and it's important for everyone to have space."

"I'm sorry," Vincent said. "I'll sleep in the garage, but I don't have anywhere else to go."

"I wouldn't let you sleep in the garage even if I had one. You're my nephew. I might be late picking you up, but I'll be there."

Vincent felt both grateful for, and embarrassed by, the kindness in Jim's voice. The last time he'd seen his uncle had been during Vincent's first month at Ohio State. They met in a coffee shop on campus, and while Jim prattled on about free admission to the art museum on Sundays, and a new vegetarian restaurant in town, Vincent couldn't take his mind off family speculation over Jim's sexuality.

His uncle had a full head of brown hair then, soft hands, and a gentle voice that seemed to parse through a word bank before carefully selecting the right one. When years passed without Jim so much as bringing a girlfriend home, the idle wondering over holiday dinner tables grew to a clamor. Now Vincent, too, was a single, childless man, and he wished he hadn't participated in his family's judgment of Jim. If only the explanation for Vincent's own failure to have a family was as simple as his sexuality. At least then he would belong to something instead of to nothing and no one.

Vincent arrived in Columbus just after three. The rain-faded concrete of the bus station, with graffiti,

litter, and dirt stuffed in every crevice, made his body itch. Still, the day was clear and bright and the city felt like a fresh start even though it had hosted his failure to finish college. At the time, he'd thought he would learn more about acting by doing it than by studying it. Intelligence wasn't Vincent's problem; he hated being told what to think.

Jim arrived in a blue Prius, drawing the attention of a few men sharing a beer concealed in a paper bag. As Vincent walked to the car, he thought of Tony. What would become of that unprotected boy? Vincent had always regretted not fighting for Tony when he and Wendy were dating, but Wendy was Tony's mother and she had no desire to reform her life.

As Vincent opened the passenger door, his nostrils filled with the competing smells of cigar and a pine air freshener. Age had shrunk Uncle Jim and wrinkled his facial features, but he was still muscular, with a square-shaped head and frame. His hair had thinned and turned gray, but it was neatly parted and slicked to his head. He wore a light-blue polo shirt and khakis, and gave off a scrubbed-clean impression. The car may have reeked of cigars, but Uncle Jim smelled like soap.

"Vincent, good to see you. How was your trip?"

"Long."

"I'll bet. Always preferred the train to a bus myself..."

Jim checked his rearview mirror and waited for a truck to pass before he switched lanes.

"So why Columbus?" Jim asked.

"I like it here," Vincent said.

He wanted to avoid all questions about his life and motives.

"I'm glad you're staying with me. I always regretted not visiting more when your parents were alive."

Vincent kept his gaze on the city, trying to maintain a sense of distance inside the car. Talking about his parents made him feel guilty, like he didn't miss them as much as he should. If they had lived, they would probably just be disappointed in him. They told him many times, "We started with nothing and we always worked. You've got to work hard if you want anything out of life. Don't expect to be lucky. Luck is for people born with everything."

To distract himself, Vincent invented a game—spot the familiar sight—but everything was familiar. Downtown Columbus' streetscape of moderate-sized office buildings, hole-in-the-wall sandwich shops, and clothing stores with a cheap air to their crowded windows could be plucked from Trenton or Philadelphia.

"I thought maybe you were trying to go back to school," Jim said.

The idea had occurred to Vincent but had never seemed financially possible. And even if it was, would he want to take classes with nineteen-year-olds when he had already learned much about life from knowing people like Wendy, making his own reading lists, and listening to what people talked about in office lunch rooms?

"No," Vincent said, "but I do appreciate the bed. Thanks for letting me stay with you."

"You're welcome," Jim said. "I like taking people in. I never had kids of my own, you know. Of course I'll expect you to contribute something to the housing expenses, though; my pension only covers so much."

Jim parked next to a Victorian twin on wide and leafy Neil Avenue. The narrow three-story house was detached, but close to its similar neighbor. Blue shutters and ornamental latticework framed the gray

stone exterior. A wrought-iron fence marked the perimeter of the yard, parting at the front walkway. The house was modest and neat, dignified like its owner.

"We rarely ever use the front door; everyone has a key to this one," Jim said as he opened the back door.

A skinny teenage boy, his headphones leaking the bassline from a rap song, shuffled into the kitchen. He held a dirty plate in one hand and a beat up copy of *1984* in the other.

"Jerome, this is Vincent, my nephew. He's going to stay with us for a while. Vincent, Jerome."

"Nice to meet'chu," Jerome said, turning off the music.

"That was one of my favorite books," Vincent said. "How do you like it?"

"I only read ten pages so far. It's for school."

Jerome turned his music back on and walked out of the room. Vincent followed Jim to the staircase in the middle of the house. As he climbed the steps, Vincent glanced at the living room. The green corduroy couch was neatly lined with pillows. Light shining on the flat screen TV revealed no dust on its black surface. The blue Oriental rug looked recently vacuumed. The room was standard enough, but the degree of its cleanliness unsettled Vincent. It gave the house an air of severity, as if the rooms were for decoration only, not meant to live in.

Jim stopped in front of a bedroom on the second floor, where a boy of eight or nine wearing black sweatpants and a red t-shirt was playing the saxophone. His feet tapped against the bottom of his bed as he practiced "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" over and over again.

"Bernard, say hi to my nephew, Vincent."

"Hi, Bernard," Vincent said, "sounding good."

"Nah, really?"

Bernard touched the music book beside him on the bed, as if it were the source of whatever skill he might possess.

"How long have you been playing?" Vincent asked.

"Only since second grade," Bernard said, "but I ain't got my own sax until Uncle Jim gave me this one."

He pressed a key and released it with a soft whoosh.

"How nice of him," Vincent said. "So music's your thing?"

"My thing?" Bernard asked, his confused expression reflected in the instrument's shiny surface.

"Your favorite thing to do, I mean."

"I don't know 'bout that," Bernard said, thinking. "I like reading. Next week I get to do a book report on Jackie Robinson."

"English was one of my favorite subjects, too," Vincent said, "but don't let me interrupt your practicing. I'll see you around."

"You play any instruments?" Bernard asked.

"No, I'm an actor."

"You can sing wit' me if you want. Do you know the words?"

"That would be nice," Vincent said, "but I'll have to brush up on the lyrics."

He gave Bernard a little wave and followed Jim up to the attic.

Vincent was surprised by Bernard's cheerful disposition since he assumed that a dysfunctional home life had landed the boy at Uncle Jim's. Perhaps genes

had more to do with a person's temperament than circumstances. Tony had certainly experienced disorder at home and had always been a melancholy child. On the other hand, Vincent had nothing to blame for the glum kid he had been. Only Myra's belief in him, her encouragement over the years, had created pinholes of light in his sadness. She considered Vincent her heir to the stage, to all the experiences she didn't have because she was raised in a time when success for a woman came in only two forms. But still Vincent never believed himself deserving of all that Myra had wished for him.

"It's not a palace, but here you go," Jim said, opening the door to the attic.

The air was damp and also smelled like cigars; Vincent imagined his uncle smoking up here with the window open on a rainy night. Jim turned on a floor lamp next to the futon. The lamp was the room's only source of light. Along with the futon there was an empty bookcase, its shelves buckled from some prior load, and a heavily scratched desk in front of the one small window. The desk's chair looked like it had belonged to a dining room set—it had a floral seat cushion and a decorative cut-out in the middle of its wooden back. Boxes filled half the room. They weren't labeled, suggesting that Jim didn't plan on opening them.

"We eat dinner every night at six. You're welcome to join in," Jim said. "Tonight we're having chicken soup and garlic bread—the boys help me cook. They're good kids. Jerome is great at science and Bernard loves that saxophone. They just need some attention."

"How do you find them?" Vincent asked.

"The schools know me. I do outreach with other Quakers and the teachers refer kids to me. Of course,

I can only take them in with their parents' permission."

Vincent sat on the futon, rubbing his hands over his knees where his jeans were already thin. He didn't believe anyone was completely selfless.

As though he could read Vincent's thoughts, Jim said, "I don't pretend to have all the answers. I don't even know what the right questions are. I just think of myself as a mentor."

"That's great," Vincent said.

"Remember, dinner at six," Jim said as he left.

Vincent looked at the boxes, wondering what they held. He didn't know much about his father's childhood. Who had been Jim's mentor and protector, if he'd had one?

Ohio State was only a mile from Jim's house, so Vincent walked there the next morning. He wore the only pair of jeans he owned, a black t-shirt he considered his 'nice shirt,' and a denim jacket faded to the same light blue as his jeans. Vincent's only vanity was his boots, a Christmas present from Wendy. They were made of carefully broken-in black leather, and probably came from Kenneth Cole or some other store Vincent had never been to in his life.

The average temperature in Columbus was about ten degrees cooler than Philadelphia. Vincent wished he'd brought warmer clothing, but walking quickly heated him. He savored the slap of his boots against the pavement and looked forward to seeing the campus again. But when he stepped onto the familiar pathways he felt nothing, not even a drop of nostalgia. He couldn't remember what he'd thought or felt

when he was there, or why he hadn't tried harder to stay. Vincent felt isolated from the current students, who walked past him in a flurry of grins, blonde hair, and Buckeyes sweatshirts. They were alien, a carefree essence radiating from them as strong and impassable as a force field.

Vincent ran his hand through his ponytail and turned his thoughts to employment. He would register with every temp agency he could find, but it might be a while before he was placed. For the meantime he needed a paycheck and he didn't care where it came from. He scanned the windows of stores and restaurants for Help Wanted signs until he saw one outside of a 7-Eleven: "Third Shift Must Work Weekends." Vincent waited in line behind an old man who slowly read off lottery numbers from a crinkled piece of paper. When the man finally left, scratching his tickets with a penny on the way out, Vincent asked for an application. The cashier, his nametag reading MIGUEL ANGEL, was younger than Vincent by at least fifteen years. He tore a double-sided piece of paper from a pad and slid it across the counter.

"Seems like everything's online now," Vincent said. "It's nice that you can still apply for a job on paper."

"You can here. The manager's older than shit," Miguel Angel said. "He don't want to use no computadora."

"Is this a nice place to work?" Vincent asked.

Miguel Angel raised his thick eyebrows and looked out the front window.

"You applyin' for graveyard?"

"Looks like that's all there is."

"Graveyard ain't so bad. You don't gotta' make fresh coffee every hour. Main thing you gotta' watch is the taquitos."

Vincent glanced at the Taquito warmer next to the register. Three bright signs advertised the flavors: Pizzalicious, Mexican Fire, and Sausage con Queso. Beneath the lurid glare of heat lamps, tubes of fried dough containing dubious combinations of meat and cheese spun on their eternally rotating beds. Vincent had eaten a taquito once, but not in a while, and they seemed to him now both revolting and seductive.

"When students wasted or pullin' all-nighters, all they want is taquitos," Miguel Angel said.

Vincent sat outside and filled in every section of the application except for address, which he hadn't yet memorized. *Life is hard, hard, hard, and you've got to work hard enough to beat it*, he thought, remembering his parents again. He wanted to turn in the application right away. Who knew how long Jim would let him stay until he asked for a contribution, or how much he would expect Vincent to pay.

Vincent walked back into the store. "Look, I just moved here and I'm temporarily staying with my uncle, but I haven't memorized his address... could I maybe use yours, just for the application, so I can turn it in now?"

Miguel looked at Vincent with friendly suspicion.

"You clean, man?" he said. "'Cos if you use my address they gonna' test your piss."

"Oh," Vincent said. "I'll just bring this back tomorrow, then, thanks."

He grabbed a pack of Bubblicious Watermelon bubble gum and dropped it on the counter.

"Man, you must be recovering from something to want to chew this sugary shit," Miguel said.

Vincent didn't bother to correct him.

"If I get a job here will I have to put my middle name on my name tag, too?" he asked.

Miguel looked down at the white plastic rectangle pinned to his shirt. The label with his name printed on it extended past the edge of the badge.

“You funny, bro. This is the name my mama gave me. Ain’t no difference to her what’s first and what’s middle. She’d have my balls in a bag if I didn’t wear it proud.”

A month passed, during which Jerome left and no new boy showed up to replace him. Vincent got used to working nights at 7-Eleven and sleeping during the day, his cell phone next to him in case one of the temp agencies called with a lead. A routine developed. Vincent would wake up around four and help Bernard with his homework, then listen to him practice the saxophone. Sometimes they made dinner together, letting Jim relax in the living room with one of his history books or golf on TV. Vincent knew Bernard might leave any day, perhaps without saying goodbye. It was like meeting someone on vacation, the presumption of impermanence shadowing every minute they spent together. But Jim said nothing about Bernard’s departure, and Vincent began to fantasize that his uncle would adopt the child.

He thought about Bernard even as he and Miguel talked about getting an apartment together. Vincent and Miguel had bonded over the pranks they played to stay awake throughout the night shift: filling the aisles with yellow Caution signs where no spills existed; putting the sausage taquitos under the Pizzalicious sign, which was funny until a drunk vegetarian spit half-chewed pieces of sausage all over Vincent’s shirt; and crossing out 1991 on the “You Must Have Been Born

on this Day or Earlier to Buy Cigarettes” calendar and writing 1929.

Miguel picked up as many shifts as he could because he was saving to move out of the halfway house. It had been his idea to rent an apartment with Vincent. Miguel told Vincent that his mother would take him back in a heartbeat, but that he wanted to be on his own so she’d be kept out of any trouble he might get into. Miguel was twenty-one and had been in trouble with drugs and police nearly half his life. Addiction, he told Vincent, was like a time bomb in your brain you tried all the time to keep from detonating.

“I’m going back to school,” Miguel said one night. “When we get our crib I’m gonna’ get a GED and then I’m gonna’ study computers ’cos that’s where all the jobs be at.”

They were stocking cigarettes together. Vincent pulled the cartons out of their shipping boxes and handed them to Miguel, who stood on a footstool and inserted the individual packs into the circular rack above the counter. Vincent couldn’t see Miguel’s face. His voice was muffled from speaking into the rows of Marlboros and Camels and USAs.

“Good plan,” Vincent said.

“Hey, why you working here anyway? Didn’t you go to school?”

“I didn’t finish. And I was studying theater anyway, which is very different from computers.”

“No shit,” Miguel said, bending over to look Vincent in the eye. “You an actor? You gonna’ be in movies?”

“I’m a stage actor, but I haven’t been auditioning since I moved here,” Vincent said.

Miguel looked at him like he knew something

about Vincent that Vincent didn't know about himself.

"Why not?" Miguel asked.

"It's hard when you don't know anyone; theater's a small world. I had connections back in Philly."

"So go out and know people, bro. Whatever you try to do in this life you gonna' be climbing uphill, but you a handsome dude, a little mysterious; them actresses will eat it up."

Vincent flushed. He'd only gone home with a woman once since Wendy. It had been hard to do while he was living with Myra—he couldn't bring anyone to the house and she worried when he didn't come home.

"Maybe I will. I do miss acting."

"I can see you still got a passion for it. Me and my madre will come watch you—that woman can cheer louder than anyone else, I swear. Broke everyone's eardrums at my soccer games."

That morning, when Vincent got home from work, he asked his uncle why Bernard hadn't gone home.

"His parents don't want him back," Jim said.

He curled and released his fingers as if expelling something unpleasant.

"So you're going to adopt him?" Vincent asked.

Jim took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He looked older without the glasses, the size of the bags under his eyes fully visible.

"I'm going to foster him," he said. "We'll see what happens. I never intended to adopt them. I'm too old to run after basketballs."

Vincent looked into the dining room, where Bernard was doing homework at the table, happily tapping a calculator.

"He isn't them, he's Bernard," Vincent said. "How old is he, eight?"

"Nine."

"It's important for boys that age to have a father."

"As opposed to any other age?" Jim said, turning his attention back to the television.

Vincent retreated to the attic, but his sleep that day was fitful. At dinner, Bernard asked Vincent to help with his Halloween costume.

"What do you want to be?" Vincent asked.

"Dunno, but something original. I don't want to be no ghost like last year."

"What about a jazz musician? You've got the sax and you could even play a few scales instead of saying 'trick or treat' when people open the door."

"That's awesome," Bernard said.

He looked at Vincent with admiration. Vincent sensed he could suggest anything at that moment and Bernard would agree, but a jazz musician was a good idea. The hardest thing would be making a pork pie hat from what was already in the house.

"Will you be able to take Bernard trick or treating?" Jim asked.

Vincent had Halloween off, but was supposed to check out an apartment with Miguel in the evening. Bernard stared hopefully at Vincent. Maybe in spite of being a sad kid Vincent had also been hopeful, at least for the time he played Massasoit, when he'd first dreamt of becoming an actor. His parents had tried their best to stamp out his desire to pursue such an "impractical career," but somehow he'd kept hoping, even now.

After dinner Vincent went through some of the unlabeled boxes in the attic. He found a child's gray suit with a few moth holes in the jacket, and made a

blue pork pie hat and red bow tie from construction paper. The hat didn't stay on very well outside. It blew away for good after half-an-hour, but Bernard loved his costume. Vincent noticed that Bernard stood a little straighter, and when he played his saxophone, he threw his head back and waved the instrument around like a musician lost in his passion.

Children danced down the sidewalks in Jim's neighborhood, exclaiming over their growing piles of candy. Bed sheet ghosts and plastic witches swayed on windy front lawns, goblins and black cats patrolled the periphery of childhood's collective imagination, and front doors opened to adults holding trays of candy bars and baskets of bright-colored wrappers. Bernard's expert rendition of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" never failed to earn him an extra piece of candy.

"See what making music can get you?" Vincent asked as they headed back to Jim's house.

"Chocolate?"

Bernard looked into his bulky pillowcase of candy.

"Tonight it's chocolate, but it could be anything. If you can touch people with art they'll give you their hearts and their money."

Vincent was talking to Bernard, but also to himself. He'd always believed that art had this power, pretending it didn't only when he needed to protect himself from failure. But he had failed already; there was no need to fear it. Bernard brought the reed to his lips and played "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" one last time as he skipped down the sidewalk ahead of Vincent.

Jim had fallen asleep in his chair by the time they got home. Vincent helped Bernard unpack his candy and then he waited as Bernard put his saxophone

back in its case. Before closing the lid, Bernard petted the soft black lining.

"I played good tonight, didn't I?" he said.

"Yes, you did," Vincent said, "and you must be tired. What do you usually have to do before bed besides brush your teeth? Do you have to take a bath?"

Vincent was usually at work when Bernard went to bed.

"No way," Bernard said. "I never have to take a bath."

Vincent raised his eyebrows. "Okay," he said, "but you should change into your pajamas. I'll wait outside."

Bernard looked down at his suit, which had been doused with glitter by a passing fairy. He rubbed his finger against the top button. "I want to sleep in my costume."

"I don't think Uncle Jim would appreciate you getting glitter on the sheets. When he washes them it'll get all over the rest of the laundry."

Bernard tugged half-heartedly at the bottom button. As it slid from the hole, he looked as mournful as if he'd just discovered the death of his first fish.

"Okay, okay," Vincent said, "but you definitely have to brush your teeth. Halloween is the most important day of the year to have clean teeth."

When Bernard returned from the bathroom, he handed Vincent a Harry Potter book.

"Chapter three, please."

Vincent pulled the comforter up to Bernard's chin and smelled his minty breath. He began to read, performing each character with a different voice. By the third page, Bernard was asleep, and Vincent crept out of the room, turning off the light to reveal a ceiling of glow-in-the-dark stars and planets.

He dug through his duffel bag until he found the notebook he'd taken from Myra's house. Then he tiptoed downstairs and turned on Jim's computer. The browser opened to Google and, with Myra's notebook beside him, Vincent typed "Columbus, OH theater auditions" into the search box and began writing down dates and times.

BRANDI WELLS

apocalyptic butter

Apocalyptic butter

I take lonely and I cover it in butter. I find all the butter and melt it in the sun. Then I drench the lonely while she watches. She looks horrified.

This is apocalyptic, isn't it, she asks.

Maybe, I say. But people do not like to hear about apocalypses so we will need to keep this one quiet.

Is there anything I can do to stop it, she asks. To save the lonely?

No, I say. There is nothing you can do.

The butter fills the room and the house and yard.

She begs me to get rid of the butter

I tell her the only way to properly remove butter is to eat it. She buys bread and bagels and pita and rubs it across the butter.

Delicious, I ask her and she shakes her head. Concentrates on the butter. I have never seen one person eat so much butter. My love for her increases with every swallow she takes. The grease on her face and hands and neck and knees only makes her more beautiful to me. She glistens. Shines. Radiant with butter. Filled with butter.

She has heart disease, but she is trying to cope

She has to take breaks from whatever she's doing to deal with the small heart attacks.

They are so small, she says. Not that difficult to

manage. A quick seizing of the chest and then it's over.

Her face pales and she trembles. It's amazing to watch the pain pass over her. To imagine her heart seizing and then pounding onward.

I replace her heart with objects I find in the street

An old piece of tire. We think about the tire and what has become of it.

I can feel it beating inside me, she says. Like, I might roll away.

You are not a good roller, I say. I have seen you attempt it and your efforts have all been subpar.

She shows me how her rolling has improved. She rolls down the street in a straight line. People gather in their yards to watch her. Amazing, they say. Simply amazing.

KERRY HEADLEY

ideal conditions

I.

When I reported that I had seen a couple cockroaches to Corky, my landlord's handyman, he used his fingers as a measuring stick and said, "Were they like this?"

"Bigger," I said.

"That'd be your waterbug."

"What do you mean mine?" I said. He didn't get the joke.

"Those real big ones? They're not roaches. They're waterbugs."

"Are you sure?" I said, hesitant to contradict him with my Internet research, which I'd compiled the night before, using the keywords "cockroach," "kill," and "health risks." Every pest control website said the same thing: The term "waterbug" was a euphemism applied indiscriminately to the German, the American, the Smoky Brown, and the politically incorrect Oriental Cockroach. People in the South said waterbug because, unlike the word cockroach, it didn't evoke the image of squalor—unwashed dishes in murky water, children with unwiped snot bubbles, ketchup stains on everything. Waterbug, on the other hand, sounded sort of cute. Like trained plankton. But that's not what I saw in my apartment.

"Well, they looked like roaches. Godzilla roaches." I said.

Corky insisted otherwise.

“Girl, I’m telling you, they are *not* roaches. One hundred percent.”

So, I made Corky a cup of coffee while he sprayed my baseboards with a neurotoxin. He thanked me and told me how nice I was. “I’m sorry for being nosy,” he said, “but I just don’t understand. How come you’re not married?”

II.

The Cry-Guy–You will find this emotive underdog attractive when you try to date too soon after a breakup. He will seem harmless in an orphaned puppy kind of way, and you will think, *A few meals, a bath and a warm place to sleep, and this guy might be worth keeping.* Unfortunately, a domineering ex-girlfriend/mother has usually ruined him for life as has his apparently untreated clinical depression. Your dates will consist of discussing his pain at length in the living room and then discussing it again in the kitchen. He prefers crying to kissing and views you as a therapist who makes dinner.

Clues to watch for:

- Sobbing voicemails.
- Thinks it’s funny to call you “Mom.”
- You never actually have sex.

The Cry-Guy is a three-tissue date that will suck your will to live. He will, however, make you feel comparatively healthy. That and his impressive collection of ambient music are his main attributes unless you can parlay this relationship into credit toward a psychology degree.

III.

Add Sea-Monkeys to the list of things I wanted and did not get as a child, which included Jordache Jeans, Mexican Jumping Beans, a Slip 'n Slide, and a horse.

"Sea-Monkeys are bugs." That was my mother telling me, finally, why we couldn't order any from the back of my comic books where they were advertised in lavish illustrations with even more lavish claims.

"No they're not," I said, sure that bugs wouldn't perform a live circus act, as the Sea-Monkeys were purported to do.

"They are, and we're not getting any."

"But I want them!" I said.

"Well, how's it feel to want and not get?" That was my mother's puzzling, self-esteem-stunting way of ending a discussion permanently.

I returned to the ads at the back of my *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* comic books. I looked at the eternally pleasant Mother Sea-Monkey with the soft-looking red bow tied atop her head. Like a bug would wear that.

I.

The first time I sprayed a southern roach with poison, its wings engaged like robotic, military-grade deflectors clicking into place. The roach made jerky, hopping attempts to fly at me. I heard seething in the telepathic message it hurled at me like a javelin: *You bitch*. Then it ran straight toward me, unafraid, and shaking off poison like a dog shaking off water after a bath. I screamed and backed away, hoping to come up with a plan more efficient than flapping my arms and whimpering. What I wanted was to turn to some

guy, wrap my fingers around his forearm, and find an alluring new approach to the Damsel in Distress.

“I know I’m being a girly-girl, but can you just make that go away?” I would say.

Thanks to decades of cultural conditioning, this guy would overcome his desire to cringe so that I would not think him a wimp. I would adhere to my assigned gender role by expressing wide-eyed appreciation tinged with a hint of possible sexual compensation. And really, the sincerity of my gratitude could not be underestimated. He would have risen to the level of Dragon Slayer. If only I had one of those pointy hats with a silk scarf attached to the top like a banner reading, *I cannot possibly take care of this myself*. It would be Renaissance-Faire-fabulous. Perhaps I am easily impressed. Or perhaps I’m accustomed to making a big deal out of the small things in case there isn’t anything else.

II.

The Tweaker—The Tweaker, with his addiction to crystal meth, provides you with the opportunity to understand in greater depth your gullibility. He emanates a pagan-esque aura of masculine confidence from the callouses on his hands to the certainty of his stare, which hypnotizes you as if it was a rack of antlers sprouting from his head. But this is before he plucks out his eyebrows. And before you realize that when he stays awake talking with you, he is limited to two topics: his supernatural abilities and his paranoia. He will cheat on you with a literal crack whore, and then you will realize his sexy, brooding intensity was simply too much rat poison in the mix. Better to leave him on the park bench where you found him.

Signs you are dating the Tweaker:

- Your CDs and appliances disappear. (Check the flea market by the river.)
- You catch him trying to control the weather with his mind.
- He tells you he is the reincarnation of Rumi.

It's not your fault when you meet someone whose brief experiment with sobriety coincides with court-ordered random drug testing. But move on, thanking God for granting you the serenity to accept the thing that you cannot change. You are not temperamentally suited to live as a prison wife.

III.

I was four when my father moved away from us to the apartment complex a mile or two down the street. I was seven or eight when I started reading comic books and, therefore, seeing the ads for Sea-Monkeys. An advertisement from 1971 depicted a compelling scene: Mom and Dad Sea-Monkey together and their two Sea-Monkey children. An illustrator's rendering portrayed them as being part sea creature and part human. They sported small, scaled potbellies and swam with two human-like arms and two legs attached to flipper-like feet. A set of three-pronged antennae graced each Sea-Monkey's head, though when I was a child, I mistook these antennae for jeweled crowns. This only magnified my desire to own and befriend them. The purple castle in the background, in which they apparently lived, reinforced their status as a Royal Family. Unbeknownst to me, and despite the name and their long tails, these critters bore no resemblance to monkeys. Seahorses, perhaps, but not

monkeys. This was the first in a series of misrepresentations.

I.

My cat Chloe acted first, sprinting across the kitchen floor after the latest roach defiling my home. She chased it up the front of the dishwasher and onto the windowsill where it tried to hide. I wrinkled my nose as the roach scrambled through the embroidery of my lace curtains—curtains that my mother had given me, which elevated things to a violation of my entire lineage. Suddenly, this was tribal.

I grabbed the Raid and spritzed a stream of it through the fabric, whining, “Why? Why?” When I hit my mark, the thing dropped onto the floor like a gigantic pecan and scurried, as usual, toward me. I yelped and hopped backwards, nearly stepping on Chloe, who was all hunter now and jockeying for a position from which to strike. But I was afraid to let her get close to a roach doused with toxic chemicals. As it was, my own lips were burning and my throat was closing from the exposure to the noxious combinations intended to deal death to bugs. So I blocked Chloe’s path and we watched it die together — she poking her head around my legs and staring with kamikaze commitment and me whimpering like a Damsel without a Dragon Slayer. When I was sure it was dead (lying on its back, legs like three rows of the number seven no longer moving), I scooped it into the dustpan reserved for dead roaches. Chloe tailed me all the way to the bathroom, staying close to my ankles and watching for an opportunity. I dumped it into the toilet; I turned to her and said, “There. It’s gone now.” Chloe looked at me and then at the toilet, wondering. Then she

looked back at me, understanding, finally, that her toy was gone and that I had done it. I did not realize until that moment that cats can, in fact, roll their eyes in irritation.

II.

The Non-Caller—A date with the Non-Caller usually goes great from your point of view. He seems to get your jokes. He makes sounds that imply interest in your work. And he tells his own stories as if he is someone like you—jaded, but still willing to get up every morning and try, in case it makes a difference. The waiter will assume you are already a couple and place the crème brûlée between you, saying, “I’ll bring two spoons.” And that will be when he leans across the table and the tea light candle to kiss you. The problem is that he turns out to be the Non-Caller. And he won’t ever call. Not ever. Not in a few more days, not in a month, not in a year.

Signs to look for: There aren’t any. The Non-Caller is a random punch to the gut that you will never see coming. You will never know why. It’s best just to pretend that he’s dead. I’m partial to the fantasy that I stymied him with my elegance and that he feared himself unworthy. Insert the face-saving delusion of your choice.

III.

The advertisement reads: “Enter the WONDERFUL WORLD OF AMAZING LIVE SEA-MONKEYS! Own a bowlful of happiness! Just ADD water—that’s all! Now, simply grow and enjoy the most adorable pets ever to bring smiles, laughter and fun into your home. Best of all, we even show you how to teach

them to obey your commands like a pack of friendly trained seals.”

If Sea-Monkeys were marketed as a hybridization of Sea World and the von Trapp family from *The Sound of Music*, then I marketed myself as a contemporary Shirley Temple wearing an imaginary emcee’s top hat and a red bow tie who might pull my family together in the living room for a Sea-Monkey matinee. It would go over better than the time I tried to put on a magic show. My father had nearly choked on his beer because I had said, “Prepare to be filled with awe.”

“You don’t know what awe means,” he’d said. He’d laughed hard, almost spilling his frosted mug into his La-Z-Boy recliner. My stepmother bolted from the couch to put clothes in the dryer and didn’t come back. My father yelled toward the kitchen, “Hey, Babe? Bring me another beer why don’t you.” But she didn’t, and she didn’t come back. My sister was trying to stick a plastic toy thermometer in the dog’s mouth since she wasn’t allowed to take a rectal temperature anymore. I’d tried to win back their attention doing a disappearing trick with a ball and a length of rope, but the moment had passed. My father was checking his wristwatch to make sure half-time hadn’t ended.

But a whole family of trained Sea-Monkeys? That was impressive. I wouldn’t say *awe* this time.

I.

I thought about how my cousin in the Bronx dealt with his roaches when sealing the cracks, spraying poison and laying out traps, and roach birth control failed to control his roach population overgrowth. Having exhausted the more secular possibilities, he dove into alchemy and anthropomorphism. He believed that if

he conversed with the roaches as peers, he could perhaps convince them to be better housemates or maybe even move out.

So, my cousin did what many do when they want to bond—he smoked pot with them. He blew marijuana smoke on the ones he could see. Then he got out his trombone and played “La Cucaracha” to honor them as a species. When that didn’t work, he carried the carcass of one roach onto the subway and rode with it all the way to the Kinko’s near Astor Place where he positioned it onto a black and white copier and copied it. He pasted the image onto a blank playing card and then added it to his Animal Cards tarot deck. This was supposed to pay tribute to roaches by adding them to the animal power lexicon next to the dragonfly and the ladybug and the spider. That didn’t work either. Finally, he sought guidance from the Jewish tradition, which blesses homeowners who affix to their doorframes a mezuzah—a tiny scroll holder containing a prayer. My cousin taped a dead roach to his doorframe and called it a roach mezuzah. That’s when my cousin’s boyfriend stepped in. “Honey,” he said, “that’s not nice.”

My cousin later told what he’d learned. “They’re a superior species. There’s no incentive to negotiate. Now I just yell ‘Die, motherfucker’ and spray the shit out of them.”

So, I skipped all the hoodoo and went right to cussing. Like they were bad drivers. Or people who have taught me disappointing interpretations of the word loyal.

II.

Fully-Realized Man—This one will get in because you’ve gone too long without sex and because you will

incorrectly believe his commitment to his spiritual practice means he possesses a generous heart. Too bad he is where you were a decade ago, wielding his devotion to the guru like a cat o' nine tails, judging people for what they eat and for owning too many pairs of shoes. When you tell him, *That's okay, I've already heard the one about everything being an illusion*, he looks at you like you're trying to cheat your way out of his class, which is spiritual special ed. Class is always in session, and he won't think it's funny when you refer to him as "a Buddha call."

Signs you are involved with Fully-Realized man:

- Ostentatious praying before meals.
- Wears a necklace that is a piece of string with spiritual powers.
- Sneers disguised as smiles intended to convey: *Your lesser consciousness amuses me.*

Once you feel certain that you've burned off enough karma for being a self-righteous vegan back in the early nineties, cut the ties to this one and move on.

III.

Here's what true about Sea-Monkeys: In 1960, Harold von Braunhut began selling mail order *Artemia salina*, which are a variant of brine shrimp most notable for their ability to survive long-term in cryptobiosis—a state of suspended animation that ensures a species' continued existence while it waits for "ideal conditions" to present themselves. For Sea-Monkeys, ideal conditions means saltwater, which facilitates the hatching of baby brine shrimp that can

live for between one and two years. Without the addition of saltwater, however, Sea-Monkey embryos remain inactive and easy to ship in the form of a dry powder—a condition ideal for creating a profitable international pop culture phenomenon.

Here's what's also true about Sea-Monkeys: In real life, they resemble bugs. Creepy, crawly thousand-leg type bugs that swim. Not something that would wear a bow or perform synchronized swimming as a family unit for my amusement. In a tiny font underneath the illustration of Sea-Monkeys was the caveat I probably read as a child, but failed to understand: *Caricatures shown not intended to depict Artemia Salina.*

I.

I was swallowing my first sip of coffee when I spotted a cockroach running from my closet and across the hardwood floor of my bedroom. Turns out my online roach resources were wrong when they said that roaches are nocturnal. Like vampires who carry their coffins with them in the form of their exoskeletons, hiding within the darkness of the sewers or the pile of sticks in my yard. This was a reality I could live with because it was manageable. Because every time I killed a cockroach right before going to bed, I repeated this mantra: *They only come out at night. They only come out at night.* The truth is that roaches are *generally* nocturnal. But then so are cats, and my cat falls asleep next to me as soon as I cover myself with the quilt. Knowledge cannot change the facts: The outlier exists as a possibility in all things. In other words, no one can predict with certainty the behavior of another living being.

II.

Not Really Separated Guy—Not Really Separated Guy gets to you like no other because you have a history together that feels unfinished and because when he finds you again it will seem like kismet shared over a cup of coffee twenty years later. Unfortunately, Not Really Separated Guy acts exactly like Miserable Married Guy, who you've always managed to avoid except for that one drunken make-out session in a car in 1987. And since he is the one man besides your father you love unconditionally, he will sneak into you through doors you don't even know you have using words like "transition" and "fate." It will take longer than you can imagine to scour him from your soft places, but you will. Afterward, it's okay to outline all the ways you would destroy his life if you weren't such a mature person.

III.

I stared at the advertisements for Sea-Monkeys as if they were photographs, as if we were already friends. I sent them telepathic messages. *I will be so nice to you. I will be your friend.* I sometimes did this instead of playing kick-the-can with my sister and the other neighborhood kids. I sometimes did this instead of leaving my bedroom.

I told the Sea-Monkeys that they wouldn't need to dive under the dirty clothes in the cabinet under the bathroom sink that served as a giant laundry basket and my occasional place of safety during the house-storms of my mother's temper. Or, if they did need to bury themselves under our tiny t-shirts and footy-pajamas, I would be there with them, protecting them, showing them how to breathe so no one could hear. But they wouldn't have to hide from me.

And you would not need to hide from them, right? That's what a therapist would say. A therapist once told me, years later, when I no longer needed a physical place to hide, that maybe I ate three chocolate mini-croissants not because I was premenstrual but because I might have been craving sweetness in my life.

"I was," I'd said, not getting it.

"No, I mean a different kind of sweetness," she'd said.

"Oh, that," I'd said.

I.

I was sitting on the toilet when I spotted a roach crawling across the bottom rung of the shelf where I keep towels. Seeing a roach walk toward me while my underwear rested between my knees facilitated my most disturbing roach encounter to date. It was only a second, but I found myself quelling a bizarre, but momentarily realistic roach-as-rapist fear. I leapt from the bathroom, grabbed Chloe and held her toward the general direction of the roach and said, "Get it, Chloe." She wriggled in my hands, not seeing it and wanting to get back to batting my cough drops across the living room floor. I was tired. I couldn't willfully spray poison inside my own home again. I shook my head and got into bed. "Fuck it. I'm not dealing with this," I said aloud. Perhaps I had reached the roach saturation point, which implied the potential for immunity, which implied the potential for hope. Or the loss of it.

II.

Multiple Chemical Sensitivity Guy—MCS Guy will show a fierce commitment to pointing out all the

ways you sicken him. He carries a cooler of health food with him everywhere because nobody else's food is healthy enough. He will tell you that you can't spend the night unless you wash your hair (twice) with his bar of special soap to make sure your chemicals don't give him a headache. When he comes to your house he tosses your hair conditioner into the yard so it can "off-gas." Shortly after replacing most of your toiletries to accommodate him, you'll discover that MCS Guy smokes cigarettes and drives with an open bottle of Puerto Rican rum between his legs that he sips while eating contraband—a Whopper secretly ordered from the drive-through window like a fetish.

Signs you're dating MCS Guy:

- Considers a colon cleanse a date.
- Sexual fantasies involve fast food restaurants.
- He tells you that he smells toxins leaking through your skin.

You are guilty by reason of temporary insanity caused by a six-week experiment with a bad batch of birth control pills. However, once your hormones stabilize, spray him in the face with Country Fresh Raid, careful to avoid your own eyes and throat. Repeat if necessary.

III.

And then I started getting the really bad news. First, I found out that though Sea-Monkeys may exist in a bowlful of happiness, this is no guarantee of love. A website devoted to Sea-Monkeys reads: "In regard to mating, if there are too few good quality men around, the female can produce fertilized eggs herself." So, even among brine shrimp there is always the

need for the back-up plan in case (surprise!) Mr. Awesomeness fails to appear. This was not the life I had imagined for Sea-Monkeys.

What soured me even more was reading this: In 1988, according to *The Washington Post*, Sea-Monkey inventor von Braunhut spoke at an Aryan Nations event advocating the repeal of the Fourteenth Amendment—the amendment that granted African-Americans equal protection under the law as citizens. Then, in 1996, The Anti-Defamation League asserted that von Braunhut was a member of both the Ku Klux Klan and the Aryan Nations, as reported by the *National Vanguard*, a white supremacist publication. And now, I stared into the racist-by-proxy eyes of the Sea-Monkey family, searching for something besides betrayal. The website accusing von Braunhut of bigotry had redesigned my Sea-Monkey family portrait to reflect its true colors. Each one now sported a Hitler moustache, their arms outstretched in synchronized *Sieg Heil* salutes.

I.

The roaches in my apartment never go down easy, unlike ants or mosquitoes — the only other bugs I can commit to killing. I shoot pesticides through the plastic straw attached to the nozzle of the can. It resembles the kind of straw with which one stirs a cocktail, except it's longer and deadly. From the first strike, I feel as if I've hunted down a hamster with a tough outer shell and the capacity to despise. Each time I snuff out the life of another cockroach I wonder who is more surprised—the roach or me. I've learned to kill roaches. Like running a jar of tomato sauce under hot water for ten minutes in order to get the lid off myself. Like walking myself home alone and carrying

pepper spray.

My father laughed when I told him I wanted to go to college, laughed the way he did when I was nine and said I wanted a horse.

But I'd won a scholarship. It wasn't up to him.

II.

The Rock Star—This man enjoys a degree of success in the music industry or in his own mind, therefore, it will be all about him. Early on, he values your creative input because no one else outside of the band can detect the minute differences between the seven versions of the song he's considering for the CD. Contending with possessive fans and rescheduling date night to accommodate his gigs will likely fill your days. You will make the mistake of making his art more important than your own and will, therefore, shrink to bite-size and render yourself invisible even to yourself. Eventually, he will break up with you and date the girl who lifted up her shirt for him at a party though he will say it like this: *I have to commit to my music—one hundred percent.*

Signs to note:

- Cell phone problems, but only when he's out of town.
- Ditto in regard to Internet and payphone access.
- Calls at the house from baby-talking women who ask: *Are you, like, his girlfriend?*

You will date The Rock Star again and again in various incarnations and in any city where there are men holding guitars. You'll have an easier time dumping his porn from your computer than figuring

out how to remove yourself from the band mailing list. Take heart, however. Right about now he is probably giving himself an ulcer, wondering if you meant it when you said, "I'm not going to write about this."

III.

I read the same comic books over and over. *Spiderman*. *Richie Rich*. *Casper the Friendly Ghost*. I never wanted to reach the end, so I read and reread the advertisements, staring at the pages until the tufted fabric of my bedspread imprinted itself onto the backs of my legs. Until my eyes burned. Nearly all the ads featured practical jokes. Hot pepper chewing gum. Soap that contained black ink. A concealed gadget that delivered an electric shock when the wearer shook somebody's hand. Next to these was the full-color illustration of a smiling family of brine shrimp. What were their names? I wondered.

When I was a child, I wanted what I wanted. Sometimes in the form of Sea-Monkeys.

JIM MCGARRAH

the road to angst

Headline—Mexico Is Warm in the Winter:

I remembered Eva as a scrawny child, freckled and puppy-clumsy, the little sister of one of my best high school friends. But time passes whether you notice the changes it brings or not. You can see something in its infancy and it appears completely forgettable such as an orchid bulb or a block of marble owned by Michelangelo. Then, you return much later to find a rare red phalaenopsis has flowered or David stands in a pile of marble shavings. The transformations seem instantaneous, miraculous even, and you're amazed at your own stupidity for not noticing these exquisite creations before. That happened to me with Eva.

Where once threads of dark hair twisted their way around a pole between her head and shoulders, the god of puberty had spun a silk shawl that curled along her delicate pearl-colored neck. The pogo sticks she walked on were now elegant and graceful legs and each step she took, a ballet. The freckles that covered her face once now decorated the bridge of her nose as if stardust. Every single hackneyed and nauseating phrase I had ever read in a Rod McKuen poem or saw on a Hallmark card paraded its way through the Swiss cheese that made up my drunken brain. The drunken delusional romanticism that had plagued my life before was at it once again. At the time,

though, I knew only one thing. The ugly duckling had become Leda the Swan, and suddenly I wanted to play Zeus.

That was the infirmity I brought home from war, the inability to distinguish specific emotions, in this case the difference between love and desire. Because I had denied their existence in order to survive Vietnam, my spectrum of moods had atrophied and now I struggled to feel anything no matter how vague. On the occasions that I did feel a warm twinge in the back of my mind, I was never sure if it could be called an emotion or simply a reaction to my intellect warning me that I should feel something, anything.

It was cold outside in the Indiana wind. We were bored inside. The wine was cheap. The pot was full of stems. Hard drugs had hurt us all in one way or another and we had laid them aside years before. And Eva, a woman a few years younger than the rest of us, a few inches taller than me, and blessed with a smile intense enough to lighten a black hole in some distant galaxy said, "I wish I could go somewhere warm."

"You'd like to go somewhere warm? I can arrange that, if you don't mind riding in an old pickup truck with two burned-out hippies."

"Sounds like fun," Eva said.

Sleeping bags and back packs, tie-dyed tee shirts and golden earrings, smoked oysters and Sterling beer, a dog-eared copy of *Death in the Afternoon* and a Rand McNally atlas, one ancient Ford pickup truck and one balding, ponytailed, be-speckled Jew whose constant good humor and kindness kept us sane driving through Kansas—these were the items Eva and I

brought from Indiana. By nightfall we were well into Kansas, heading west and south at seventy miles an hour. The battered old truck rattled and shook, the wheels shimmied, the tires thumped like hoofbeats, but we kept moving forward as if Tom Joad's ghost pushed us from behind. The sun had simply spread out like a pat of butter and melted into the dry toast landscape. I saw the same flat nothingness in the indigo night that I had seen during the day. The only difference was darkness. Joey slept against the passenger side door, his ponytail rubbing a slick spot on the glass. I drove and stayed awake by focusing on the night sounds led by his snoring and the occasional splat of a bug on the windshield.

Eva dozed, head resting against my right shoulder. She must have been dreaming. I watched her nipples harden, jealous at the unknown source of her sleeping lust, and lit a Camel to keep from kissing her. Outside on the highway, the headlights shadowboxed with a few sparse trees. The clouds cross-hatched the stars. Eva's bare and beautiful legs stretched beneath the dash. She rocked slightly to the rhythm of the road harmonizing with the low hum of rubber on asphalt and night folding over the green glow of the radio like a spent squeezebox. Janis Joplin ground out a gritty prophecy for my future in Mexico—take another little piece of my heart, oh baby if it makes you feel good.

In a couple of weeks this vacation would end and I would lose myself in the disjointed myth that life is organic poetry, something to be suffered through, as I went back to work. All the while, the real myth slept

beside me, lips slightly parted. A loose strand of dark hair slipped across her silk cheek and I reached to brush it back, one last chance at one more trip... I brushed her breast instead. She stirred only slightly. Steering the truck, my hand grew numb, my mind barely conscious that while Eva loved boyish charm, it was only sweaty danger that excited her. I remembered Norman for an instant, the blind butcher from my former home in Sugarloaf, New York, who used to levitate roast beef across a whirring electric blade with the power of a seer in his fingers. I wanted his magic. I wanted to stroke my friend Eva so gently that her own moaning woke her. I could have done it before Vietnam diffused my senses, making love an intellectual exercise too complex to simply squeeze and let go. In my mind I saw a vision of romance and tragedy, acceptance and rejection, a prophecy of love overwhelmed by the existential dread of an inability to live outside my imagination.

“A self-fulfilling prophecy is an assumption or prediction that, purely as a result of having been made, causes the expected or predicted event to occur and thus confirms its own accuracy,” or so noted Austrian psychologist Paul Watzlawick once wrote. I spent my Mexican vacation affirming his words, but not before roaring into Tucson to watch my friend Jim Hayes pretend to be a Navajo and hammer out some beautiful turquoise and silver jewelry on the work bench inside his tiny adobe hut.

“We sell these bracelets to the white man. It makes him feel less guilty for the genocide of our people.”

“You’re not an Indian, asshole,” I said and opened an Olympia beer.

“I might be.”

“And I am Jewish,” said Joey. “So let’s get real with that genocide talk.”

“All I’m saying is that when you participate in the great peyote ritual your spirit commingles with the elders of the tribe.”

“Is that what they call tripping in Arizona—commingling?”

Eva asked the question with that particular tone of voice indicating her bullshit alarm bell had just been triggered. She asked us to drive her over to see one of her best friends from high school who had recently married a drug dealer and moved to Arizona. Tucson had two things going for it in those days: dry warm desert air that suited Midwestern retirees and a close proximity to Nogales and the Mexican border. I understood why the dealer had moved from Indiana. He had a partner and a refrigerated truck and they made regular runs into Mexico returning with packages of frozen sea food from the port cities along the Mexican west coast. This “sea food” was then driven back to the middle of America, rolled in Zig Zag papers of varying flavors, and smoked at parties to exclamations between coughing fits that sounded something like, “Boy this Acapulco Gold is good shit,” or “heavy, man, heavy.” By the third time around a circle the conversation tenor got serious, “Being an astronaut is a good idea if only I was smarter,” followed by “fuck being an astronaut, I am an idea,” and the conversation stopper “who ate all the fucking Fritos?”

For the man I’ll call Johnny, this line of work made perfect sense. He was dumb, fat, and cruel

and looked exactly that way. A few years after our visit he found what he'd always sought, an early grave. What I couldn't fathom then and still can't after all my own unsuccessful relationships is the nature of attraction. His girlfriend, the one Eva came to visit, seemed intelligent and kind. She was definitely good looking, meaning she had nothing in common with Johnny. Almost any two people in the world can stand each other long enough to fuck, but once it's over what makes the days and weeks and months and years of misery worth the effort of staying together? I have never come to a satisfying conclusion on this matter and, as old as I am now, doubt that I ever will. Certainly those of us raised as Christians learned early on that we were unworthy of happiness until we died. Maybe, that's part of it, but it never seemed that simple to me. It's almost as if there's an overwhelming need for penance as a form of balance when in a sexual relationship because the sex feels too good. In my younger days that's how I defined love, the struggle between joy and guilt.

Headline—Alien life forms in the desert outside Tuscon:

“Didn't I tell you?”

Hayes pointed over a slight rise and down into a ravine past some sage brush at the bank of a small creek almost devoid of water flow. Eva had remained in Tucson to reminisce high school over a few joints and a bottle of Boone's Farm apple wine with her friend. The desert beckoned. We answered the call.

"You did, you did," Joey said, removing his fogged up glasses and wiping his sweaty forehead with his tee shirt.

"Shut up, Joey, before you scare them away."

"Hell, McGarrah, they ain't rabbits. They know we're looking," Hayes said.

One of the most pleasant aspects of late winter in the Tucson desert revolved around the indigenous wildlife coming out from under winter cover and returning to its natural habitat. First of all, giant saguaro cacti bloomed with beautiful flowers and rearranged every image of the prickly plants in my mind created by cowboy movies. Then, desert scrubs swept the sandy floor fresh and clean. Rattlesnakes sunned themselves on rocks that seemed sculpted by Salvador Dali. Prairie dogs poked their heads furtively from burrows at random intervals, almost like I was playing one of those "pop-a-mole" games at a local arcade. Purple, orange, blue, and silver colored vegetation dotted the shadowed dunes with kaleidoscopic chaos and in alien shapes. Overhead a cloudless sky of pastel blue complimented the sun. Even the jungles of Southeast Asia could not compete with this environment for surrealistic beauty, especially when Hayes handed me the binoculars and I had a closer glimpse of the most magnificent creatures in the desert. Four young women sunbathed on blankets. They were topless and well-endowed with blossoming flowers of their own, or to quote Joey, "Look at all those beautiful tits."

"This is why I love you Joey," I said, "even though you're twenty-five your penis is still fifteen years old, just like ours."

Hayes smiled and jerked the binoculars from Joey's sweaty hands.

Headline—Bullfight on Asphalt:

Even emotionally regressed idiots having fun can talk about tits and drink Olympia beer for so long before they realize John Berryman was describing them—“life, friends, is boring...” but “Even to say so means you have no inner resources...”—in his famous poem. After two days of “bird watching” we kissed Hayes goodbye, corralled Eva, and pointed the truck toward Nogales and the Mexican border. We crossed without incident—it’s much easier getting into third world drug-producing countries than getting out of them—and drove 250 miles along Highway 15 until reaching the port city of Guaymas in a jittery, cramped, exhausted bundle of flesh. Most of the anxiety came from driving in Mexico. I had forgotten since my last trip the trick to surviving Mexico’s highway system, especially at night. You must remember, first and foremost, that every truck driver suffers from the illusion that he was meant to be a bullfighter.

From pickup to semi, each vehicle’s cab gets wrapped in multi-colored Christmas tree lights and a statue of the driver’s favorite saint straddles the dashboard. As you approach a curve on one of the narrow mountain switchbacks and meet an oncoming truck, like a bull you will be forced to make a decision because you will be challenged by a cape of flashing lights surrounding the specter of a bobble-headed religious icon. You must choose whether to remain temeroso, a timid bull unwilling to charge, or decide to perform an acometida, charging the truck swiftly. The truck driver will always strike a desplante, or a pose where he dares you to charge, and at some point on a narrow switchback three thousand mile from

your home you will meet your hora de verdad, the moment of truth. If smart, you will be a temeroso, a timid bull that pulls to the shoulder of the road and waits for the truck driver to roar past, his cojones enlarged and yours shriveled to raisin size in your pants.

Headline—American Tourists Sodomized and Left for Dead:

I chose timidity for the most part until my irritated ego could no longer deal with compromise. We survived several close encounters, but the screams of Eva and Joey forced me finally into a sad little motel on the outskirts of Guaymas. We took refuge for the night in a room that could have been used on the Spanish version set of *Psycho*, paying our few pesos to a night clerk that faintly resembled Tony Perkins, in the dazed and crossed eyes at least. Nevertheless, a good night's sleep, huevos rancheros with chorizo and some café con leche revived us. Departing for Mazatlan in good spirits, we felt buoyed by a bright white sun in a cloudless blue sky. Nothing dampened our quest for adventure during the 700 mile trek along Highway 15, not even the roadblock. Yes, that's right. It seemed as if the highway system in Mexico required policing by little fat men in cowboy hats carrying WWII vintage Thompson submachine guns. For our protection, they removed us from the truck, searched Eva's suitcase, particularly her underwear, for contraband, and after deciding we had nothing of value, let us drive on in exchange for a pair of sunglasses and a thousand pesos (about ten bucks in those days). Joey and Eva laughed. The episode seemed to them as a plot from a bad movie. On the

other hand, I was relieved at the relative ease with which we escaped, having seen first hand in Vietnam what could result from the combination of isolation, emotion, and weapons.

Headline—Tourists Rescued by Fun:

There are few things in the world more beautiful and calming to the spirit than the gentle ebb and flow of the Pacific Ocean at sunset, especially in Mazatlan, Mexico. At least, that's the way I felt as our dusty truck ran parallel to it. We found a clean, cheap hotel on the beach and settled in for a week parasailing, body surfing, sunbathing, fine dining, horseback riding, and general faux jet-setting activities that poor white trash from the U.S. could accomplish in Mexico where being wealthy meant holding a hundred dollars.

Joey and I prowled the savage back alleys of the port city late at night while Eva slept. We drank Pacifico beer and shot pool with greasy sailors off cargo ships in smoky bars barely lit well enough to see the cue ball. The drug dealers and dock workers wagered how much time would pass before one of us ended up sliced with a switchblade or clubbed with a pool stick. We smiled and lost our money with great dignity, which no doubt saved our lives. But, these kinds of common sense thoughts never crossed my mind in those days. I was Kerouac and Camus rolled into one, searching for the answers to questions that have none. Or, this was the romantic type of drivel I kept myself moving forward with and it was the danger that came from reading books like *On the Road* and *The Rebel* while trying to deal with memories of war.

Eva did her own daylight explorations, maybe hoping to find a Latin Jim Morrison among the hustlers and tourists along the white sand. Mostly, she seemed in a perpetual state of wonder as if we had brought her to a paradisiacal planet in some unknown and faraway galaxy. Whether we dined on fresh sea bass, sipped white wine, and danced in elegant restaurants, oiled each other as we tanned, or scoured the crowded marketplaces for rainbow colored scarves and hand-carved soapstone chess sets, she laughed and played and grew emotionally from a reference point of honest innocence. Her face took on an expression of constant joy. I had never seen that kind of openness and freshness before. It came close to ruining my trip. Certainly, it turned me into a petulant child for a short time because I wanted something I could never have.

Headline—Cruel and Unusual Punishment for Immature Male:

I wanted to be falling in love. In many ways I already loved Eva and she seemed certainly worthy of my affection, but in those early post-Vietnam days what little emotional substance was left to me after the war could be expressed only in generalities. Like discovering the location of a lion when it roars close the ground, emotion roared over me in diffused waves and paralyzed me with fear as I struggled to find its origin. Adoration, hate, anger, sadness, lust, joy all made the same loud sound in my psyche. They all felt like guilt. I discerned no nuance between love and lust and when Eva's sweet body aroused me in her tiny black bikini, rather than accept the feeling

for what it was—desire—I chose to objectify it romantically to assuage my guilt for wanting anyone so sweet and young and innocent. I could only live with my constant inclination to run my tongue over her nipples and twirl it around her navel if I believed the feeling meant something deeper. I had no idea then, nor do I now, what deeper meant.

Neither did I understand at the time that the process, the journey, has always meant more to me than the end result. Like a shark must keep moving or die, I am a person who must keep moving toward some goal. I drive myself relentlessly toward something until I reach it and then immediately search for a new pursuit or find myself dying of an existential ennui. I would have hated myself if I had reached my goal in this case and become bored. At least now I recognize that a sexual conscience is as much a delusion on one end as “free” love is on the other.

Whatever the reasons for my confusion, the consequences remained internal. I never discussed them with Joey or acted out any amorous intent with Eva. We spent our time in Mexico as it was meant to be spent in those days, as adventure and exploration, as hedonism and visceral joy, as a way to not grow older or more responsible. I never told Eva the way I felt, either. Part of the reason lay with my inability to make myself vulnerable, a holdover character flaw developed in the killing fields of Vietnam. But a bigger part, I think came from my own lack of understanding about feelings, what they were, where they came from, what made some appropriate and others ridiculous flights of fancy.

Ultimately what I missed, and still do from time to time, is that fact that once you try to discern the way you’re supposed to feel in a given situation and

then create that emotion consciously, you're no longer really feeling anything. I know, I know, I know it's complicated being a fucked-up male full of ambivalent yearning and self-loathing. It's not necessarily the way we're made, but it is the way we most often end up making ourselves. I had a tremendous amount of good fun on this road trip as evidenced by the fact that I remember so much of it forty years later and still think fondly of Eva in that bikini from time to time.

On the other hand, as proof that good, Midwestern, Christianized men can never enjoy life without punishing themselves for their pleasure, I offer one last anecdote for your contemplation. The entire time in Mexico, I avoided the dreaded intestinal conflagration known as Montezuma's Revenge, the Gringo Gallup, or the Aztec Two-Step by drinking bottled water, eating peeled fruit, cooked vegetables, and well-done meat at expensive restaurants. I went so far as to gargle every day using cheap tequila as a prophylactic mouthwash. On our journey up from the bowels of Mexico, my bowels remained in perfect working order. Consequently, I had a voracious appetite, and so the little white truck stopped for snacks frequently.

As we approached the border near dusk, intending to drive through the night until we reached Jimmy Hayes and his jewelry shop in Tucson, we spotted a clean looking restaurant barely on the Mexican side. Our last meal in country was a feast and, for me, included a bottle of Sun Kist orange soda to wash down steak, corn, shrimp, peppers, refried beans and fried ice cream. Against any possible vestige of common sense, I decided such a clean, well-lit place so close to the American border would surely

have sanitized water absent those tricky little bacteria that brought about the fecal waterfalls infecting so many less sophisticated tourists. I splurged and ordered a glass of ice to chill the tepid soda, and by the time we left Jimmy's two days later I traveled home seven pounds lighter.

MARK SPITZER

back to france

Fifteen years ago, I was a punk. An idealistic, translating, gutter-grubbing, bedbug-bitten punk living off the philanthropy of others. I had no wife, no house, no job, no health insurance, no cats—just credit cards I juggled back and forth. I was doing it for Genet, Céline, Cendrars, Bataille, and the wine and hash at night. I was also doing it for the gals, the mystique, and the pure romance of living amidst addicts and thieves at the infamous expatriate bookstore Shakespeare & Company.

Now, however, it's 2010 and I'm an assistant professor, hoofing through the streets of Paris. Same streets I used to kick along wondering what would happen with the bet I dared to make with the world that all those years of staying up late and translating by candlelight would eventually open some doors for me. I was gambling on the chance that if I delved as deep as I could, the payoff would be something other than what Corso termed "pee stains on my underwear."

Back in 1993, I chose to believe in this thing called "the Thing," which was supposedly going to change the world. I put a lot of truck in it. Too much truck in it. To the point that I fanatically believed that if I didn't get my story of the bookstore down, the old man who ran it would die. So I wrote my ass off to save George Whitman's life, because if I couldn't write *After the Orange Glow*, I was nothing. That's

what I was committed to and that's what I did, and it slapped me back to "reality"—a word I circle when my students use it. Because what the hell is *reality*?

Well, in this one I've been invited to take part in a big international conference on Jean Genet, sponsored by the Federation of International Translators, because suddenly I've been recognized as the world expert on Genet's poems. Yep, all that banging my head against the table, all that fighting for rights and being denied, all that guesswork and research and corrections and revisions, all those coffee shops hunkering down with native speakers, driving thousands of miles to special collections, all those years of failure! Then putting the results on the Internet, because the Estate refused to honor its promise to cooperate.

The Internet, though, that's how the F.I.T. found me, and that's why I'm not just heading to the Odeon Theatre, where I'm scheduled to present a paper; I'm also heading back to Shakespeare, where I found myself in the rush of the world. That's where George took me in when he was merely an octogenarian. He put me to the test, had faith in me, and let me live in his store for years for the sole purpose of translating French criminals and misanthropes.

Since then, I've acknowledged George in almost every book I've published, and I've sent him copies as well. But of course I never receive word back. That's just not his style. I do know, though, that he remembers me, because I've met people who've gone there, and they tell me stories about George telling them "There once was this guy who slept on a board..." and "That book there was written by a guy who lived in this room. He had to try real, real hard to become Writer in Residence, but eventually he did..."

George is 97 years old now—and, so I hear, not doing well. He had a stroke and he's sick in bed. He's hardly ever seen in the store, which is run by his daughter Sylvia Beach Whitman. Who, when I wrote to ask if I could stay in the Writer's Room and give a reading, responded that there would be construction going on.

Whatever.

So technically, my brain is returning for Genet. My heart, however, is returning to the largest collection of English-language books in Europe—and George. Because a decade and a half ago, I left part of myself in that “rag and bone shop” across the Seine from Notre Dame.

The streets are less filthy, less filled with trash. There are bright green bicycles everywhere which citizens can rent. They just slide their cards and ride across town, then park at another rack. There are a lot fewer smokers as well, so a lot fewer gutters filled with butts. Even the cops are polite when I ask for directions to my hotel. And, so it seems, everyone speaks English now. Things have changed in France.

Especially the trashcans, which don't exist anymore. Now there are just clear plastic bags hanging where the garbage goes, due to all the bombs that went off in 1995. That's when I last laid eyes on Shakespeare.

Last time, though, I didn't have a travel bag with a suit in it slung over my shoulder. Last time I had a plastic suitcase filled with dictionaries and a dot matrix printer. And, of course, George's famous first edition of *Ulysses*, which my manic-depressive,

paranoid-schizophrenic, psychotically delusional girlfriend planted on me. I sent it back as fast as I could, but the damage had been done.

But now, here I am again, standing in front of that classic red and green storefront, where the tree I used to climb every night and hang beer cans in has increased in diameter. Back when Mad Dan tried to chop it down, that trunk was eight inches in girth. Now it's at least three times that.

I go in through a door that was never there before, and the place looks pretty much the same, except for an extra cash register to account for more customers.

I talk to some employees who say that maybe George will come down later. I doubt it.

So I go up the stairs—my stairs, the stairs I've always gone up, and will continue to always go up, because this is my place!—and I knock on the giant meat locker door that George had installed after some thieves tried to murder him in the night. Or, at least, that's what he claimed, swaying in his red pajamas, waving a bottle of ketchup in his fist.

Some kid answers. Another employee.

"I have returned!" I tell him, and he just looks at me. So I tell him my name, that I was Writer in Residence from 1993 to 1996, and that George has been expecting me.

The kid goes away, then comes back. I'm ushered into the back room, and there's George, in bed, even more malnourished-looking than he was in the 90s, all skinny and scrawny with his skull pushing through his face. Same stark-white hair, though, erupting from his messy head.

"George," I tell him, "you're my hero."

"You don't look like Mark Spitzer," he replies in the littlest voice I've ever heard him use.

I tell him I am, but I can see that he doesn't recognize me. So I tell him I'm that guy who ran with that girl who stole the money and went to Morocco. He just looks at me.

So I link myself to Majella. I figure he'll remember her, since it's hard to forget a beautiful, bubbling nightclub singer who goes on to become the number one country star in Australia. And he remembers her.

Still, I can tell by the way he's looking at me that I'm just another one of hundreds who come to him every year and tell him they once stayed in his store. I always got a kick out of how he used to pretend to remember them, but once they left the room, he'd turn to me and shrug.

Anyway, I'm invited to stay for coffee. But it's awkward, since I'm not one to sit around and chit chat, and it's obvious he's going down. George is definitely on his deathbed. So I bid him adieu for the very last time.

Downstairs, I drop off a bunch of *The Genet Translations*. They're hot off the press, just in time for the Genet event. After being fucked around for almost twenty years, I decided it was high time to get my Genet poems and two posthumous plays published as a historic pirated edition. So I approached a publisher I knew would go nuts for the stuff, floated him my idea of setting up an imprint that the Estate could never find and so never shut down, and he established Polemic Press, advertised on the Internet, and now the book is out.

"Do you want to put them on consignment?" the employee asks me.

“No,” I tell him. “But please give George this autographed copy and let him know that I gave these others to the store. He’s given me more than he could ever know.”

Then I’m off to meet the Federation. They’ve invited me to dinner along with the other Genet scholars. There’s a Finn, a Norwegian, some French, a guy from Paraguay, and the keynote speaker Neil Bartlett. He’s a big deal. A British playwright and director, he translated *Splendid’s* and published it with Faber & Faber back in 1994. I had a contract for the exact same Genet play, but he beat me to it, secured the rights, got the gala production in London, and there wasn’t a thing my shitty little publishers could do.

Bartlett’s translation, of course, is inferior to mine. I even said so in my intro when I published it in *Exquisite Corpse* back in 2001, so I’m worried he might’ve seen that comment.

They seat me next to him and immediately we connect. He’s gay in an S&M biker way (leather pants, shaved head, handlebar mustachio) and we’re all talking about Genet. Bartlett is considered the authority on the drama. Edmund White, of course, is the major authority on everything Genet, and both of us have worked with him. Edmund White, though, is teaching at Princeton and couldn’t make it.

And as we’re sitting there eating, drinking, talking Genet, I realize that this is the first real French meal I ever ate in France. Three whole years I lived here, but I could never afford a dinner like this. Grubbed on falafels and fries in the alley, stewed soups in hot-pots, but never sat down for all the courses and the towelettes.

But the thing is, it isn’t the professor who discovers this. It’s that punk I left behind. And as a true

Bohemian, he gazes amazed at what he's become, dining with a tie on, discussing the Diaspora.

The next day, at the conference, I debut my book by distributing copies to all the Genet scholars, including Albert Dichy, Genet's official chronologist and Director of the IMEC Archives. I showed up there in 1992 and was granted access to the largest collection of Genet resources on the planet not because of my gold-stamped letter of introduction from the University of Minnesota, but because of my relation to the famous linguistic literary critic Herr Dr. Leo Spitzer. Dichy then introduced me to Edmund White, brought out piles of rare publications, and worked with me enthusiastically until a member of his staff started eyeing me suspiciously. For two years, she was always following me around and leering at me, because I wore torn-up jeans. Then they started charging me for doing research. In the end, I made off with an obscure glossary of Céline's argot, because they treated me like scum.

Now, though, I'm the punk translator of the punk poet-thief, and everyone's glad I defied the Estate. These authors and academics have been studying my work online for years, and they respect my research and accuracy. They know the value of making the poems accessible in English, and they know how crappy the other versions are. Plus, they've all had their share of dealing with the Estate; aka Ms. Joanna Marston of Rosica Colin Ltd., who's notorious for cockblocking Genet translations and major theatrical productions.

Many of the papers are being read in French, which I have trouble understanding. That's why I be-

came a translator—because I'd rather take my time decoding a text than speaking to people in the streets. But I do understand the papers in English. It's about half and half. And in the end, I present my paper, there in the grand Odeon, where the crowd is full of international scholars, students, and fans of Genet. And in the lobby, there's a bookfair. And outside, there's a giant banner of Genet's bald head hanging from the balcony.

My paper is about the historic tradition of not giving a wang dang doodle for English-language rights when it comes to publishing Genet's poetics. It all started in the 50s with a Scottish translator, then moved on to America where poets like Frank O'Hara, Diane Di Prima and Jack Hirschman continued to ignore the Machinery of Censorship. I note this as I make a case for the necessity of such defiance since it helps us understand the context, then end with my own experience of being silenced. The moral of the story: English-language readers deserve honest, accurate translations of Genet.

And guess what? My justification is accepted, and applauded even. I have stolen the intellectual property of a thief and have given my own away to the world, International Copyright Law of 1976 be damned!

Then most of the scholars go to a dramatic reading of the posthumous Genet play *Elle*, which I translated as *The Pope*, because that's what the pronoun refers to. This performance, however, will be in French. So I follow my feet, which naturally lead me home.

To Shakespeare. Where there's absolutely no construction going on. Where I'm hoping some wacky character from my past will instantly arrive on the scene and we'll go shooting off to some party or stay up all night debating the influence of the Beats. But none of that happens. My peeps are gone. So I poke around until I'm a stalker. But what I'm stalking, I don't know.

The catacombs are closed so there's no going down to my ancient office in the curving stone. The words "Hell's Kitchen," however, are still visible above a doorway in the Sylvia Beach Library. I scrawled that sixteen years ago, adjacent to the store's motto: "Be not unkind to strangers, lest they be angels in disguise."

I also notice that there are no drifters anymore—from New Zealand or Canada or Romania or Iowa—working for a place to stay. That generation is long gone. Now that Sylvia runs the joint, it's a lot less sleazy. There are no junkies hiding in the shitter. In fact, there is no Turkish shitter anymore.

So I look through the books, which I used to browse for hours. These days, though, I don't automatically go for the K section, searching for Kerouac and Kesey. This time I go for the S section, but there's none of my books anywhere.

In the Genet section, however, there's a copy of my new translation. When I pull it out, I see it's the copy I signed for George.

The next day at the conference, I'm included in the final panel, which is made up of the authorities on the drama, prose and poetry. So there I am with

Neil Bartlett and a Scandinavian dissertation candidate, and the question being put to us is “What can be done to increase Genet’s readership with this new generation?”

Bartlett speaks and so does the Norwegian. I hadn’t really considered this issue, but when they pass the mic to me I lay down some thoughts I thunk up on stage. First of all, I tell the audience, we need to work more with the new media. Turn the poems into hip-hop videos and post on YouTube. Make movies based on plays. Secondly, I profess, let’s get the Chinese on board. There’s millions of readers in that demographic. And thirdly, I proclaim, let’s encourage more pirated translations. The Estate had their chance and they blew it. We can’t trust them. It’s a historic tradition anyhow, so let’s make the work accessible.

People clap and the show is over—but not so fast! Because suddenly some lady is standing up and addressing us. She’s the President of the Federation of International Translators, and she just can’t condone what I said. She explains that as literary translators we must cooperate with authors and their heirs to legally acquire all rights and permissions, or else we undermine our industry. She then gives me a very stern scowl, tells the crowd that what I’ve suggested is dangerous and unethical, and sits down with her lips pursed tight.

I nod graciously in response and don’t say a ding-dang thing. Some other questions are raised and answered, and eventually the room empties, except for the organizer and myself. She’s extremely apologetic and had no idea that the President would fly all this way for this panel.

“No problem,” I tell her, then apologize myself, to have put her in this position.

Whatever the case, the scholars have gone to see a new documentary about Genet. And since it's in French, and since I know I won't catch enough to make it worth it, I set out again to Shakespeare & Co.

There's an event tonight. Some Irish guy has written a Victorian humor book and he's doing a signing. I get there early, mill around. Ask an employee why my personally autographed book for George is on the shelf.

"Oh, that must be an accident," he tells me. "George keeps signed books in his personal collection upstairs."

I tell the kid to give that book directly to George, and then I ask where the other ones are, since I dropped them off the day before. He tells me that somebody gave them to somebody to do something with, and I tell him he better find them and get them on that shelf pronto.

Another employee starts pouring wine. I go over to grab one.

"No," he tells me, "Sylvia told me not to give any away until the signing begins."

He stands there like a guard, and then I see the author come in with his entourage. He's smiley and jolly and he quips about how great it is to be back again as Sylvia and her workers welcome him with handshakes and hugs. Then he sits down in front of his books and starts signing, people lined up all the way back to the cooking section.

And of course I feel like a big-ass 44-year-old baby. Of course I think that should be me, the "prodigal son" (as George once referred to me) having re-

turned. But Thomas Wolfe was right, of course. Of course of course of course of course.

So I head directly to the wine guy and he sees me coming. He knows exactly where I'm going and he raises a hand to try to stop me.

"Don't worry," I tell him, and pick one up and slug it down. Then I put that glass down, pick another one up, and walk right out the door, never to return again.

But I do return, after kicking around alone for two days. The conference is over, I'm all zonked out on jetlag, and I've been reading Bolano's *2666* all night long, wishing I was back in Arkansas, checking my lines on the autumn lake.

I don't return to the main bookstore, though. I go to the Antiquarian Shop next door, where I slept for months and repaired the big picture window and chipped out the Medieval beams and plastered George a brand new ceiling. I go there because Sylvia is in there, and there's something I have to do before flying back to America.

"Hi," I tell her, and she looks at me indifferently. "Your father meant a lot to me. He let me live here for years because he believed in the work I was doing. So I want him to have this."

I hand her a signed copy of *Writer in Residence: Memoir of a Literary Translator*, which has just been published by the University of New Orleans Press.

"It's about living here," I tell her, then risk confiding even more. "I dedicated it to your father. I know he won't be happy with how I illustrated him, but I also know that he let me live here so that I could tell my story of the store."

“I’ll give it to him,” she says with a snap.

“And I’ll be sending another memoir in two weeks,” I tell her. “It’s also based on living here, and it’s also dedicated to him.”

“Just send it addressed to me,” she says, not even looking at me, “and I’ll make sure he gets it.”

“Thanks,” I reply, then really leave. Forever.

Back in Arkansas, seventeen years after I drafted it, *After the Orange Glow* finally comes out—so I send an autographed copy to George. Meanwhile, *Writer in Residence* is about to go into a second printing, but then I get a call from Bill Lavender, my publisher at UNO Press. Seems Sylvia is miffed that the store’s logo was used on the cover without anyone asking her for permission. Bill admits to lifting it off the Internet, and says he’s scrambling to create a new cover. He’s offered \$500 to make things alright, but Sylvia is threatening to sue.

A few days later, it gets worse. The editor I refer to as “Fatboy” has called Bill to complain about the way he’s portrayed, and he, also, is threatening to sue. Bill tells me he can’t sleep.

Then, to top it all off, Sylvia sends the following email:

I have now taken a brief look at the content of “Writer in Residence” by Mark Spitzer and I am telling you that I am shocked . . . Besides the **poor** quality of the writing, there are many “facts” that are incorrect. The unheard of author clearly hopes to take advantage of Shakespeare and Company’s world-famous name, image and reputation and I, as the bookshop owner and

legal representative, am avidly against this. I already know of two people who are extremely unhappy with the content and most likely going to take this further.

Bill says he has to scrap the book. If the Provost finds out, future projects could be jeopardized. So he's bending to pressure and taking it out of print.

I understand, and am not really that disappointed. I finally have a banned book. At least in one bookstore in Paris. The Village Voice, on the other hand, wants more. They're selling like hotcakes over there. Still, someone has gone onto the Shakespeare & Co. Wikipedia page and has deleted the references to my books about the store.

That's what happens.

And here's another thing that happens, one year later, now a promoted, tenured professor (though once a punk, always a punk): George is dead at 98, and a flurry of ex-residents are posting blogs all over the place. Everyone has a story now.

Except me. I've been doing it all along, and I have made my peace with George—who may or may not have received my books depicting his Bohemia as a place where poetry and madness converge, inspiring generations of literary imaginations. And who may or may not have read about how I fought like a rat for him. And if he did, he may or may not have decided my motives were ridiculous. As I do now, staring out the winter window, mollified by the fact that I did what I could for our cause.

VIVIAN WAGNER

how to crochet

1. Be five years old. And be awkward: for instance, don't know how to throw a ball. Because then, your mom will want to teach you how to crochet so that, as she tells you at the time and years later, you would be able to do *something* with your hands.

2. Start with the yarn your mom has stored away, extra yarn that she gives you, a dusty rose acrylic from K-Mart. She'll also give you a shiny gold-toned G-hook, which will feel a little big for your tiny hands, but it'll work.

3. Make a loop with the yarn by folding over the tip and drawing a loop through, and then tighten it around the hook. But don't tighten it too tightly, because the whole thing about crocheting is looseness and flow; you want to be able to pull yarn through and make new loops upon new loops. Crocheting is all about loops, and about the ability to unravel any mistakes. Your mom will tell you this, and when she does, nod knowingly, though you might not entirely understand at the time.

4. After you make the first loop and put the hook through it, draw a loop through. Then another loop. Then another. You're making a chain, which is the foundation of all crocheting.

5. Continue making this chain for days. Take it to your babysitter's house, where you work on it. It will get very long, but don't worry, since your mother said you have to be able to make a perfect chain before you can do anything else. When it gets too long to carry around, end that chain by cutting the yarn and drawing it through the loop. Start another chain. And when the kids at the babysitter's house ask what you're doing, tell them you're making hair ties. Because that seems reasonable.

6. On a Saturday afternoon in the trailer, while your mom is taking a break from digging ditches outside for pipes on the property your family is just settling into the California mountains, sit down with her on the brown naugahyde couch. Show her your collection of chains and feel happy when she nods her approval, her soft light-brown hair wisping out of her rubberbanded ponytail onto her face. Then she'll demonstrate how to do single crochet. You turn your chain back the other way, and take the hook, skip one loop, and put it into the next loop on the chain. This will seem confusing at first, since you've been so absorbed by the chain-making, but trust me. Put the hook into the loop, and pull through another loop, so that you're then holding two loops on your hook. Then, hook the yarn around the hook and pull it through the two loops. You've made one single crochet. Try again, and then throw the whole thing down on the couch in frustration and tell your mom you can't do it, that crocheting is impossible. Note the softness in her face when she says, "Well, it just takes practice. You'll be able to do it."

7. Run outside and down to the creek, where you can sit on a boulder and watch the water go by. Swear off crocheting.

8. That night, while you're watching the *Six Million Dollar Man* and your mom is putting TV dinners in the oven, take the crocheting out of your bag and work on the single crochet. Find your way across to the end of the chain, realizing that with each stitch it makes more sense and becomes easier. Understand that maybe your mom was right about practice.

9. Take your project to school. When your friends ask why it's shaped more like a triangle than a square, say you meant to do that. Tell them you're making a Barbie skirt.

10. Double crochet is the same idea, except you loop the yarn around once before pulling it through. For triple crochet loop it twice. And so on.

11. Your mom will die at some point, too early, sick from emphysema brought on by years of smoking, and when she does, realize that crocheting is one of the most important things she ever taught you to do. Because it involves loops. Because it's calming. Because it lets you unravel mistakes.

12. Years later, work on an afghan for your daughter, using dusty pink, off-white, and deep red acrylic yarn from Wal-Mart. One night, while you're crocheting and watching Harry Potter with your agile, soccer-playing daughter who has always known how to throw a ball, she'll ask you how you learned to crochet. Tell her that Grandma taught you. And when

you ask if she wants to learn, don't feel bad when she shrugs and says no, not really. Because you can teach her other things, and though you might not realize it, you already have.

JOSHUA BURNS

maritime

now the anchor's wet
the wave's completely dry
either might just hang out with us

unprecedented

Skeleton commercials
dandruff turning angry
throw shampoo on it

CHLOE N. CLARK

ghost-pressing-on-body

Twelve times I will think
of you, of your hands, the length
of your fingers, the fine
bones of your wrist. In my sleep,
I toss and turn until I'm raw
with it. I fall into cities,

the streets are all named after
ex-lovers, ex-friends, the dead mother
of my first kiss. There are no eyes
on faces in these cities, just holes,
gaping and dark and filled up with
the way a well looks once it's been
abandoned for years: emptied and
dangerous and easy.

Twelve times I will think
of you until I remember the door
is locked, no one opens it anymore,
and then you as breath, as weight, as
not quite there.

Wake me
up when I stop moving.

let no sleeper betray you

I dreamed last night that I
fried cubes of d'anjou pears
in butter and brandy.

I wrote you a letter
you couldn't read
in emerald ink and composed
of untranslatable symbols.

I read a book I once
loved, again, but backwards
like the doctors said how
I shouldn't. It would make
me shiver and shake.

I dialed your number but
the phone only rang
in an alternate universe
where my eyes were marbles,
shiny and sightless.

I dreamed last night that I
stayed up all night praying
for you to keep breathing and the pears
tasted sweet
and burnt.

WILLIAM DORESKEI

large format

As I walk toward the Charles, the large
format photographer intercepts
and persuades me to detour
to her town house where her husband
twitches at his built-in wet bar.
Her photographs of famous writers

adorn bank windows from Cambridge
through Cleveland and Chicago
to Portland and Seattle. Soothing
my geographical angst, these big
stark Polaroids stare me down.
If I were so photographed my face

would fell miles of first-growth forest
in Siberia. Huge oil tankers
would split their hulls and poison
the ocean with barrels of crude.
An earthquake would ripple and shrug
West Coast nuclear power plants

into coughing toxic ruins.
She has always understood this,
so has never asked me to sit
before her coffin-shaped camera.

Her husband has tired of the law,
and she can't buy film or find subjects

worthy of her remaining stock.
The Charles glimmers in the distance.
I turn from the window to face
a smiling Allen Ginsberg shorn
of his famous beard. The day goes down
on all fours behind me, groaning.

The photographer shows me photo
after photo of famous deaths,
including Olson in his coffin,
and I douse myself with martinis
mixed by her husband who mutters
famous curses under his breath.

deconstruction applies to everyone

A student crazed by his grades
holds us at gunpoint. Not a gun,
but a blackboard eraser. The threat,
if not the means, is real. The door
opens, the dean swings a softball bat,
and fells the disgruntled student.

Later at Twenty-One we laugh
over a pitcher of ale. Your face
still glows with excitement. Too bad
the police have charged the dean
with reckless enthusiasm.
Sounds religious, doesn't it?

The student, bleeding and weeping,
will sue because we failed him
in our first and only team-taught course
on graffiti's tribal idiom.
He expected art; we fed him
vulgarity he fled to college

to escape. The pub shudders as crowds
of revelers cheer a stripper
whose impromptu act has attracted
nearly every eye. Not yours,
which wobbles in its socket and rolls
backward to examine the forepart

of your brain. "What are you thinking?"
Tom asked Vivian, and she cried
and fled to Bertrand Russell.
Have you a philosopher hiding
in your closet? Deconstruction
applies to everyone. The dark

pooling in the parking lot congeals
in a tarry mess. I'll walk you
back to the office. We'll both
sleep on the floor. Your books will loom
overhead, threatening not to crush
but to confirm our foolish dreams.

YORGO L. DOURAMACOS

bones

I no longer want bones.
mushrooms and fungus
for the support of growth and visions.
I'd first prefer hollow reeds
like bird wing bones and I'd pack them
with tobacco to smell like a southern
summer evening.
and on the third night a mushroom
would grow and not a bone and I would thank god
for moss and birds and tobacco
and for the single mushroom
I'd stand upon to praise his name
in a vision of mourning
and a good morning for change.

I no longer want bones.
milk and sheep's wool instead
for the walking of paths in winter.
I came to this world with all
I will likely still have by the end.
I would prefer time's arrow wrapped
in yarn and lace and wet with milk.
not rigid as bones and marrow.
my uselessness is not unique
and neither is my limited beauty.
it is all like dead and death and fresh
wool from milk-heavy sheep.
if life will only take

my bones for these things
before it does for dust
I will be happy.

I no longer want bones.
the dry air calls me
though femurs and foot bones
anchor me down. I want science
to release me to fancy
instead of my lonely flesh tonight.
it's a high and solitary madness
that loves any man or
that any man would love.
I want the gust of nature
and time with Earth at last.
life is too long a delay before
we can abandon our skeleton
and finally seep like water
into the ground.

DEREK FRAZIER

sherman alexie won't let me be indian

Sherman Alexie won't let me be Indian.
What does he know about it?

Nothing.

Did his great-grandmother tell him stories of Indians
on horseback
In the woods of Oklahoma?

No.

He fills his stories with Bullshit names like
Builds the Fire, Falls Apart, and Wonder Horse.

My family filled their stories with Real names like
McNair, Rice, Rainbolt, and Miller. Names filling up
Pages and pages of the Dawes rolls.

What does Sherman Alexie know about the Dawes
rolls?

Nothing.

Was Sherman Alexie there when
I pushed that Choctaw boy into the creek? No.
He was sitting in his little cinderblock house in the
woods.

We call that hick.

Was his great uncle the most successful bookie in
Tulsa?

Were his family moonshiners and workers at the Box
Factory?

No.

Did he drink rum with Miss Teen Cherokee Nation?

No.

I did. I slept on her couch, fought white boys who
Took advantage of her drunkenness, spit on their
shoes,
And called them vile names.

Indians don't always fight cowboys, or even other In-
dians.

Sometimes they just fight.

Sherman Alexie likes Indians who look like Indians.
He would

Deny me my high cheek bones, dark eyes, dark hair,
spotty beard.

He would see my pale skin.

Sherman Alexie writes stanzas about Jim Thorpe.
My grandmother talked about Jim Thorpe, in the
same way

She talked about characters in the Bible.

Sherman Alexie writes about salmon, but never talks
about fishing.

My father caught stripers beneath the dam.

I caught catfish in Crow Creek, crawdads and frogs
with my hands.

Sherman Alexie writes poems about Sasquatch.
My great grandfather saw Bigfoot, chased him off the
porch with a
Shotgun, said only "I saw the Devil."
My Aunt Carmie told me this. She saw the footprints
near the gate.
She told me of the strangeness, the fear that night.

Go make your cliché movies, Sherman, I'll sit here in
the Piney Woods and
Write about my heritage.

My mother's cousin rode a horse at a canter while
standing on its back.

I feel sorry for you, Sherman, you one-trick pony.
We don't confine ourselves with reservation borders.
We educate ourselves, drink beer, tell old stories late
at night, and
Donate ourselves to science when we die.

We don't make movies about fry bread.

Stay on your reservation, Sherman Alexie.
We will live in the pines and remember the oaks,
And towns drowned by lakes,
And Bigfoot,
And Gilcrease,
And pock-marked faces and ponytails at family re-
unions.

DOROTHY ALICE KILROY

pride

Here I am
at the spacecraft landing,
but I am all alone.

I crave the stars,
a lack of
gravity.

I had no problem getting here,
in fact I felt grown up
putting one foot in front of the other –
I know all this, I know all this.

Now I'm sorry I ever told you
I didn't need your help.

The language my sickness contrives
translated onto buttons
the sober me
cannot operate.

I want to fly, I think
when my arms are so heavy
they are furthest
from wings

they can be.

“Out of my way”

I ran to the spacecraft

“I am gifted

I can do this on my own”

And here I am

One step away

But I don't have the key

cosmosis

I conjure your face

in cracks in a wall;

then have to look

away. Like a constellation.

I gaze into the night

and trust

there is meaning

in these alignments.

ELIZABETH LANGEMAK

comfort me, but not with apples

Comfort me, for there is no comfort
that lasts beyond itself. In late fall
when the orchard's arms are too tired
and slight to hold fruit, in winter when snow
borrows the branches, bring me
what is in season, what will not last.
Deliver yourself by weekend's grace
and Monday's threat to my door,
your sheet haunting-heat dissolving
behind you. Bring me a shirt with your scent
nearly deposed by detergent. After dinner,
the dessert; after dessert the wine
until the wine is gone. Keep your suitcase
open for coming and going. Fingers soon
gone with your hand cast not even the shadow
of fingers behind them, your voice
in a room has no likeness, no lasting.
When you are gone there is no false store
of apples. Nothing rots, nothing lingers.

an apology

Even young I knew: imagination was mainly for seeing how things would not be. I practiced on my dog. I imagined him hit by a car, frozen, fallen into a permanent sleep. When he developed a cancerous limp instead, I understood nothing I could think of would be as I thought. I moved on to bigger things, worked on technique: twenty thoughts on college roommates, thirty guesses about where I might live, how I might meet my husband. Each came to me unexpected, as I could not have foreseen them. I wouldn't have wanted to know and so I thought harder, I imagined my work, my friends, the ways I thought I could love people. It was good not to glimpse these: they were not blurry nor dim but totally out of my range, they did not shock nor startle but each as it happened let itself in, a stranger with a key to the room where I waited. For pleasure, I tried small things too: the color of my first car, how good I would be at racquetball, if dinner would taste like the picture made it smell. None were as I thought. After a while surprise no longer surprised me, I knew I could not say what I felt even when I practiced beforehand. When I met you, I looked for each word I wanted to speak and when it was not there I was not amazed because by then I knew imagination was a machine for not knowing. So last night when you said I was not thinking of you when I thought of us I said, *I think of you always*, but I see now that I have actually imagined everything else, that I think of what we might be but sometimes not what we actually are. I know I am not quite what I thought, that I cannot say well what I most

want to say. You are not what I expected either: forgive me for imagining you otherwise.

BRIAN NICOLET

saigon

When you wash up on your wickerwork shore
you will be the batter of mathematical proofs,
such blunt sticks swung swiftly, or endangered light,
its darts deflected off of the moon. Soon
you will go into that looser intelligence

with a thankless grace: as your sun
is a spoon and spills easily. But the simple
syrup runs out, beatifically, over the counter
of your unstudied predisposition. It will taste
like grommets but look like bulbs

unsettled in the window planter. And the grates
will cook flesh without meaning to.
And the towel will absorb your eyes.
And the clock will do its terrible thing,
as a peeled apple rusting in wind—to which you

will object!—while the moon spindles forth
its hideous beautiful blanket regardless
and the tin can beneath the grill
captures extant fat. Fact: unlit cigarettes
smell like raisins. Opinion: the pug tastes rain.

And the candelabra you fashioned of stars
is antiquated. As they're more like a broth. Wet sound
sets in. The concrete breathes steam. It might seem
like a cloudy Saigon morning tonight, but the trees
aren't blowing in wind. They're slowing it down.

nantucket

They have fashioned a lamp from a trumpet, its bell
targeted groundward. Two of its valves are de-
pressed, the other:

exuberant! This is considerably more important than
the fact that its mouthpiece is absolutely missing.

Buzz, buzzzzzzkill. Is what it says now out in the hol-
lyhocks.

A passing drone listens attentively. Slows.

If the drone is facing west the sun is escaping. If it is
facing east the drone is projecting.

Exactly.

If I am in the business of cartography, it is because I
find myself with no map.

Here we may say something of eternal return.

Enter mastication, that dirty word. Enter the hot
stewardess, he is a man. Exit Loop 1, stage left.
Enter: the clowns.

I am a mathematical constant. I am a taxonomy. I am Sam Malone pining after Diane, more as a game, really, so as not to reveal deeper sentiments. The tabloids will call us Samiane or Diansam or Disam, anything that sounds vaguely pharmaceutical.

Norm will call us Sam and Diane.

That's why he's called Norm.

The exuberant trumpet valve continues. The depressed two continue too, everybody continues to continue. When one valve grinds the gears of his pickup the other imagines the gears grinding are the sprockets of heaven discarding the unwanted chaff of clown souls.

In this way the souls are no longer themselves.

This gives the valve great consternation. But she doesn't say this.

Nobody here is saying anything. They grow to a digital roar. Like a menudo downpour. Or so it begins to sound inside the server. Which is considerably outside

Nantucket.

TJ O'DONNELL

the book of knots

You might devote hours
to the study of rope,
go to lengths to learn

the value of this twist
over that, when to use
half or whole hitches

and, sitting in your
Swedish armchair
with a Belgian ale,

practice your Portuguese
sinnet, like a small child
at the scales on her

equally small violin;
you play your way
into something larger.

The sun sets. Venus
shines in the pale night
sky. Maybe you are

a better person for it.
Maybe this time
you've got it right.

Your work, your etude.
Tight blue spiral of
hand worried cord.

i must make more

Of everything glued
together, thin stripped bottom
wrapped in ten ounce cloth,

epoxy, varnish
and paddled for the far
bank's smooth, dark stones.

Silt encampment, high
grass, mosquito drone, river
flush over clear river bed

and you won't hear the paws
in the water padding
wet sand, tearing the tent.

Make less of this instead.
Rest your head instead.
Stay at home instead

in a bed of peeled birch
posts, dimensional spruce
and washered lag bolts.

Listen for footsteps
coming up the stairs,
stopping at bedside,

invite what I've made
to make a nest next
to me, roost under down.

KEN POYNER

the why of death

When I ran out of bullets
I took the next one
With the rifle butt. I was
Magnificent: with an open swing,
Legs planted in the perfect and proper V,
Twisting at the waist and with
A follow through that began
From the economics of my toes.
I could not have done this more
Textbook. Smash! went the head,
And earthward another zombie tumbled.
I was on to the next, stepping back
Only to give myself more room in the midst
Of the fallen. I know

I could have turned and ran, I could have
Out distanced these slow footed revenants,
Been uncharted miles down the road, could have
Joined the remaining living in our safe place,
Relaxed discussing our inevitable come back:
Stretched in the strato-lounger, the last
Of the warm oolong tea running against my chin,
I could have analyzed, coordinated,
Plotted our parenthetical return to the light.
Our mutual respect and need for each other
Could have sustained us through any complication.

But there I was, bent into an exquisitely asymmetric
Punctuation surrounding the historic story wonder-
fully at hand.

Three more and the rifle butt gave out.

Somewhere I found an axe.

The mist of atomized bone was everywhere. Decay

Rose as though on heat thermals. "Take that!",

I cried, and "Take that!"

And the zombies exploded, point

Taken. Oh, you should have seen me!

I am sure I could have gone on forever.

STEPHEN ROSENSHEIN

colca canyon

The taste of Alpaca heart on my lips
smoky and mixed with potatoes and peas.
The texture of the heart is hot wax
the potato soft and mushy
the peas pop when squeezed.

I pay six soles to two women
walk through their town
their empty square
their empty church
their neighbors' empty houses.

Tuna cacti climb their walls
the roofs are gone
leaving an outline of moss
where thatches once sat
the dried bricks now
the texture of cracked desert
compressed cakes of mud
sprouting weeds.

confort

In some Chilean restrooms
they charge extra for toilet paper.
If you paid flat rate for a token,
the TP is included.
If there's no cover charge,
just ask for confort.
You won't find any in the stall.

Should you find yourself in such a predicament
remember: it's either a cotton sock or
digging into the used stuff in the trashcan.

christmas in brazil

The night we arrived in Paraty it was raining. It was Christmas. The town smelled of roasting meat and fish. Water ran down the grooves of the colonial streets. Fat drops splashed into the Atlantic. Fat drops formed little obelisks of dark water that grew then shrank away inside circular basins in the surface. The basins disappeared when the obelisks of water came crashing down to fill them. The closer we got to the water, the more the town smelled of seawater. The longer the rain fell, the more the town smelled of fresh rain on stone streets. That night we ate hamburgers in the street. They tasted of meat and fish and warm rain. The day we left, it was still raining. The smell of meat and fish was gone. All that was left was the smell of fresh rain on stone streets and the lingering smell of the sea.

PATRICIA ROY

poetry is the first sign of spring

The winter-world is silent, encased in window glass.
Eyes plead with sky and dirty snow,
“Give me something I can sing to,”
but nothing stares back, a blank page.

Poets make tracks in ice and snow,
bivouacking through snow-rock hills,
when even the dog-walkers stay home.

In the outer-world, a dark river melts, and the current quickens.

A buzzing in the heart escapes into restless sighs,
and a voice first heard in silence
from behind storm windows, now,
like a chant,
summons forth the season of sound.

Suddenly then, a song, sweet and singular,
a chickadee cries from its own heart,
a heart that beats a hundred times faster than mine,
quicker to sense the way being cleared,
quicker to hope and to know.

pine grove at weir hill

Along the rock tumble of a sloping drumlin,
wide and burnt across the edge,
a pine grove changes everything.
High above the briars and blueberries,
strange birds call to me
like foreign radio stations.
As I crest the ridge, its body
draped in flame-colored
needles, I breathe,
mouth open,
just enough
to smell
the smoke
of fir branches,
full sun and winter air.

JEFFREY TUCKER

the darkness game

Now we play The Darkness Game
hiding in the unused closet
covering seams of daylight with our backs.
Wrap your forefinger around mine and trace
a line down the bridge of my nose and below
to my lips. If you insist on peeking
I'll set my hair on fire.

Once there was a boy.
He climbed the hill down the street
the one lined in prickly pear and poison oak
and, at the top, there was a rock that breathed
like he was breathing: reedy and shallow,
quick as a scared rabbit. He listened to the air moving
in and out, sweeping over the wild fennel.
Finally he ran deep into the hills
and he only comes out in the dark.

We will be like that. Wait for the sun to give up on us,
then climb rooftops and eat walnuts dropped by
crows.
Follow coyotes and watch them gorge on cats,
our faces drawn and knowing.
It will be so much fun, we'll wonder
how we ever grew to love the brazen day.

BILL WOLAK

the chief's pillows

In African tribes where the chief
maintains a harem,
after selecting the wife he desires
for the night's lovemaking,
the remaining wives vie to accompany
the couple to the royal bedroom
to serve as human pillows.

the wedding dance

After the ceremonies end,
and the feast is finished,
when the toasts and drinking
are well under way,
the wedding dance begins
and lasts all night.
Guests, dressed
in their finest clothes
that they were so proud
to display at the wedding,
strip piece by piece
in front of the bride
and bridegroom,

throwing off their clothes
until all are dancing naked
in a drunken frenzy.
Couples exchange partners
or have sex in large groups.
Husbands, wives, lovers, strangers,
relatives, musicians, servants,
and even the bride and groom
are passed around for pleasure,
and no one may be refused
any act of lovemaking
no matter how depraved,
and no guest may depart
until he or she has made
love to the bride or groom or both.

JOHN BYRNE

in elsinore

An original play that includes lines from Shakespeare's Hamlet.

SETTING: A front line trench in France or Belgium during World War I.

CHARACTERS: Three men in the British army. An enlisted SOLDIER, a SNIPER. and a CAPTAIN, who outranks the others.

OPENING: As the play opens, the sniper is peering through the telescopic sight of the sniper rifle. He stays looking through the sight for most of the play. He doesn't turn when he speaks. After a moment, the soldier crosses behind him, bent low, and sits with his back to the trench side beside the dummy which he cleans off to get it ready for use.

SOLDIER

I am glad to see you well, Horatio, or I do forget myself.

SNIPER

You do not. And I am glad to see you, too.

SOLDIER

'Tis now the very witching time when churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out contagion to this world. This bodes some strange eruption of our state.

SNIPER

It's not been that bad, old man. Some shells. No gas. No indications of any imminent attack.

SOLDIER

Ah, the time is out of joint: O cursed spite that ever we were born to set it right.

SNIPER

Horatio, witching time, time out of joint. I take it, old chap, that we are meant to be in Denmark tonight?

SOLDIER

You are welcome to Elsinore. (*Pause*) Has this thing appeared again?

SNIPER

I believe I have sighted the bastard's rifle and enough movement to believe he's set up a bit to the north. I'll get the best view if you place our little friend a little to the right of where he leans against the trench wall. I'm not absolutely sure, mind you, but I'm sure enough to want to keep my eye on the spot and I would advise you to keep your head well down.

SOLDIER

Ah every man hath business and desire such as it is.

SNIPER

I'd rather this hun's business were elsewhere. He's a

bit too accurate for my taste. He's hit three men yesterday and I want an end to it. Can you get our friend ready?

SOLDIER

I am constant to my purposes. If your fitness speaks, mine is ready; now.

SNIPER

My fitness speaks. I am ready. Now.

SOLDIER (*very loudly*)

How now! A rat?

The soldier raises the dummy suddenly. There is a shot and the sound of a bullet hitting the helmet. The soldier throws down the dummy and throws down the piece of wood while shouting out.

SOLDIER

Oh, I am slain!

SNIPER

(*loudly*) Stretcher! (*softly*) He's there, alright.

SOLDIER

Saw you not his face?

SNIPER

No, but I marked the spot well.

SOLDIER

By indirections find directions out.

SNIPER

Exactly.

SOLDIER

Let it work: for't is the sport to have the engineer hoist with his own petard.

SNIPER

I think I'll stick with my Enfield rather than a petard but I appreciate the sentiment.

The captain enters.

SOLDIER

O, 'tis most sweet when in one line two crafts directly meet.

He sees the captain and salutes from a sitting position.

CAPTAIN

At ease, soldier. Stay as you are marksman.

SOLDIER

Sir, what is your affair in Elsinore?

CAPTAIN

What's your status here?

SOLDIER

Truly to speak, sir, and with no addition, we go to gain a little patch of ground that hath in it no profit but the name.

CAPTAIN

That almost sounds like a complaint although I doubt you could verbalize an accurate one. Why do you call this place Elsinore? This is Red Section 3, and you will use its proper name.

SNIPER (*while keeping his watch*)

Sir, it's just his way. He didn't mean any disrespect by it. He speaks as if he is in a play.

CAPTAIN

A play? What sort of nonsense is that? There's a war going on. There is no time for plays.

SOLDIER

All the world's a stage.

SNIPER (*sharply*)

Wrong.

SOLDIER

Right. Right. The play's the thing.

CAPTAIN

What are you two jibbering about?

SNIPER

Sir. He's Hamlet tonight. That's why he mentioned Elsinore. It helps.

CAPTAIN

Helps what? What on earth can you mean?

SNIPER

We're under constant attack, sir. Shells. Gas.

Snipers. Rats. Our position is ...

SOLDIER

...roasted in wrath and fire and thus o'ersized with coagulate gore.

CAPTAIN

Stop it, man, you are not Hamlet. What business do you have believing you're Hamlet?

SNIPER

The conditions, sir ...

CAPTAIN

The conditions are no different for any of the men in these trenches nor are they any different for us at headquarters behind the lines. It's war. We put up with it. And you have no need to go around pretending to be at a theater. Get a grip, man.

SNIPER

He's very good at what he does, sir. Together we draw snipers out and dispose of them.

SOLDIER

Constant to my purposes; sir, they follow the king's pleasure ...

CAPTAIN

It is neither the king's pleasure nor mine to have people talking mad nonsense in the middle of His Majesty's war.

SOLDIER

I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is

southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.

SNIPER

And more to the point, sir, he knows how to make a realistic decoy and his handiwork has saved many of the King's men.

CAPTAIN

This is highly irregular. Isn't Hamlet the one who conspired against his lawful king? Killed the king, in fact. A kind of early Bolshevik regicide, am I correct?

SOLDIER

He was a man, take him for all in all. I shall not look upon his like again.

CAPTAIN

You are choosing the role of a conspirator against your king. The rumors were true.

SOLDIER

You were sent for and there is a kind of confession in your looks.

CAPTAIN

I was sent here, yes, because of rumors of impudence and bolshevism. I was sent here to crush it, and crush it I shall.

SNIPER

Sir, he's harmless and he does a good job.

CAPTAIN

He can't do a good job if his attitude is wrong or if he spouts rebellious slogans.

SOLDIER

There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.

CAPTAIN

More insolence, eh?

SNIPER

But sir, we're doing what we are supposed ...

CAPTAIN

You are supposed to maintain decorum.

SOLDIER

You question with a wicked tongue. Com'st thou to beard me in Denmark?

CAPTAIN

Enough. I will have order in these ranks.

SOLDIER

What is the reason that you use me thus? I loved you ever: but it is no matter. Let Hercules himself do what he may. The cat will mew and dog will have his day.

CAPTAIN

I am not Hercules and you stop speaking this way right now. And look at your dummy. You have put epaulets on its shoulders as if it were some officer. You are waving the form of an officer to be shot by a German. Pure bolshevism.

SNIPER

Verisimilitude, sir, not bolshevism. The hun has to be made to believe the dummy is real. It's more likely

an officer will move around.

CAPTAIN

It's insolence, is what it is. Take those epaulets off.

SOLDIER

Though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.

CAPTAIN

I can do what I want and you will do what I tell you.

SOLDIER

I pr'y thee take thy fingers from my throat; for though I am not splenitive and rash yet have I something in me dangerous which let thy wisdom fear.

CAPTAIN

A threat! You would threaten me?

He moves toward the soldier.

SNIPER

Sir!

SOLDIER

Sit still!

The captain rises a bit as he steps on the wood.

CAPTAIN

You will ...

There's a shot and the sniper fires immediately. The captain is hit and goes down.

SNIPER

Perfect. Got him. (*turns back*) Oh dear.

The sniper goes to the fallen captain.

SOLDIER

Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool. If thou hast any sound, or use of voice, speak to me.

SNIPER

He can't hear you.

SOLDIER

In that sleep of death what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil.

SNIPER

He's not dead, but he will have a bad headache tomorrow. Stretcher!

SOLDIER

Angels and ministers of grace defend us. Say, why is this? Wherefore? What should we do?

SNIPER

Report we bagged another hun and hope our friend here gets a medal for his work as a decoy. I'll bet it is the best work he's ever done. Stretcher!

The soldier sits down by the captain.

SOLDIER

'Sblood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out. There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in

your philosophy.

SNIPER

He needs a stretcher bearer more than a philosopher.

SOLDIER

Time is out of joint. *(Pause)* Fetch me a stoop of liquor.

The sniper rummages the captain's pockets and pulls out a flask. He hands it to the solder.

SNIPER

Go easy on it. I've got to go for a stretcher and I wouldn't mind a tot when I get back.

SOLDIER

Do it, England. He will stay 'til you come.

The sniper leaves.

SOLDIER *(toasting the captain)*

Heavens make our presence and our practices pleasant and helpful to you. *(Shakes his head.)* Ah, where should we have our thanks? Not from his mouth.

There are distant explosions. The curtain closes.

AUDIO/VISUAL ART

While not included in this edition of Issue #3, original visual art by artists Otha “Vakseen” Davis III, Geoffrey Miller, and Richie Moriarty can be found as part of the online edition at mag.chamberfour.com. An audio rendition of Brian Bahouth’s “Gonzo Station” from this issue can also be found there.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Brian Bahouth is a longtime public radio reporter, on-air host and short story writer. He has been adapting his fiction to audio since 1999, and from his studio in Reno, Nevada, he continues to study how crafted sounds, musical elements, and spoken words combine to create meaning. Brian also produces *My Audio Universe*—a literary magazine of sound. You can find him online at: <http://brianbahouth.com/>

Martin Barkley lives in Austin, Texas. He writes fiction mainly because he refuses to work for labor pimps anymore. His wife Dee has played along so far. Martin was a finalist in the 2012 *Texas Observer* Short Story Prize, and he has stories scheduled to appear this winter in *The Threepenny Review* and the *Good Men Project*.

Joshua Burns owes a lot to William & Mary, especially for his previous publication in *The Gallery* and indirectly for his forthcoming publication in *elimae* and for his other poem about commercials at fortunates.org. His artistic sensibilities would not exist were it not for his roommates, including those who stayed only a week, his teachers, or his roommate's hardcore T-shirts. He intends to repay them all by maintaining a good publishing record and pursuing an MFA at whichever of the many locations that accepts his highly anticipated application.

John Byrne lives in Albany, Oregon, with his wife, Cheryl, an artist, and their high school age daughter, Sean Marie. He writes short plays, some of which have been staged in New York City (off-off Broadway); Fremont, California; Seattle; Independence,

Missouri; and locally in Albany and Corvallis, Oregon. He also writes short stories and short poems which have appeared in a wide variety of print and internet journals and in two anthologies with a third on its way. He volunteers in local schools to help with poetry and theater and he maintains a web site for local student art and writing (www.linncountykid-screate.org).

Scott Dominic Carpenter was born in Minneapolis but grew up on the move. After proving himself ill-suited to mining, factory work and other forms of hard labor, he took refuge in libraries and classrooms, many of them located in Madison, Wisconsin. Now a professor of literature and literary theory at Carleton College (MN), he also commits acts of fiction, examples of which have appeared in such venues as *Atticus Review*, *Ducts*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *The MacGuffin*, *Prime Number*, *Spilling Ink*, and many others. A Pushcart prize nominee and a semi-finalist for the MVP competition from *New Rivers Press*, he will soon release a collection of short stories (*This Jealous Earth*, MG Press, January 2013) as well as a debut novel (*Theory of Reminders*, Winter Goose Publishing, June 2013). His website is located at: <http://www.sdcarpenter.com>.

Chloe N. Clark's work has appeared or is forthcoming from *Prick of the Spindle*, *Rosebud*, and *Weird Tales* among other publications. In her free time she works at attaining the self-proclaimed title of world's best cupcake maker and studies the history of magicians.

William Doreski teaches at Keene State College in New Hampshire. His most recent books of poetry are *City of Palms* and *June Snow Dance*, both 2012. He

has published three critical studies, including *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors*. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in many journals, including *Massachusetts Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *The Alembic*, *New England Quarterly*, *Worcester Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Modern Philology*, *Antioch Review*, and *Natural Bridge*.

Yorgo L. Douramacos is a 30ish writer/janitor/filmmaker from central Indiana. He writes regularly for invisiblevanguard.com as Lucky the Tourist.

Aj Ferguson makes his home in South Florida and spends most of his free time working on a novel-in-progress. He's worked as a telemarketer, a line cook, a bouncer, a timber cruiser, a mortgage broker, and various other jobs on both the left and right coast and points in between.

Derek Frazier is a polymath with degrees in ecology (BS), visual art (BA) and literature (MA). He worked for too many years as an environmental consultant in Dallas before splitting for the Piney Woods of East Texas, where he makes art and writes in- well, not in peace, but something between it and boredom. He gathers inspiration and literary fortitude from the raccoons that live outside his bedroom window and the treefrogs that optimistically peep all night long.

F. Dianne Harris is an artist and writer who lives in Houston, Texas with three cats and a collection of rubber ducks. She recently took up writing after a 10-year hiatus prior to which her fiction and poetry appeared in *The Ledge*, *Poetry Motel*, *Bayousphere*, *Buffalo Press* and *Iowa Woman* amongst other publications.

Kerry Headley's work has appeared in *The Rum-
pus* and *Tawdry Bawdry*. She writes and teaches in
Wilmington, North Carolina.

Dorothy Alice Kilroy is a writer, singer and aspiring musician from New York City. She has been writing stories, poetry, songs, and more since she was just learning how to hold a pen. Recently, she has studied writing in Boston and New York. Aside from writing and music, she is fascinated by and passionate about art, film, photography, feminism, psychology and the supernatural.

Elizabeth Langemak lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

John H. Maher is a graduate of Skidmore College, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in both English and history. He is the recipient of the 2012 Frances Steloff Poetry Prize, and his poems have been acclaimed by Mark Wunderlich as being "sharp, short, and striking, notable for their control and their certainty. I admire the endings of the poems in particular, with their modest flourishes, their brandished daggers." His poetry, fiction, and essays have been featured in *The Midwest Coast Review*, *Magnapoets*, *The Adirondack Review*, and *Red Lemonade*. He lives on Long Island.

Jim McGarrah's poems and essays have appeared *most recently or are forthcoming in Bayou Magazine, Breakwater, Café Review, Cincinnati Review, Connecticut Review, Elixir Magazine, GreenBriar Review, and North American Review*. He is the author of two books of poetry, *Running the Voodoo Down*, which won a book award from Elixir Press in 2003 and *When the Stars Go Dark*, which became

part of *Main Street Rag's* Select Poetry Series in 2009. He has also written a memoir of the Vietnam War entitled *A Temporary Sort of Peace* (Indiana Historical Society Press, 2007) that won the Eric Hoffer Award for Legacy Nonfiction and *The End of an Era*, a nonfiction account of life in the American counter-culture during the 1960's and 1970's, published in 2011 by *Ink Brush Press*. McGarrah has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a finalist twice in the James Hearst Poetry Contest. He is editor, along with Tom Watson, of *Home Again: Essays and Memoirs from Indiana*. Any of McGarrah's books may be ordered from your local bookstore or purchased online at Amazon. Barnes & Noble, or Powell's Books.

Brian Nicolet also has an MFA and stuff. He is an academic mentor and writing tutor for student-athletes at the University of Texas. His chapbook *Ode to a Means to an End* was a semi-finalist for a contest a year ago, but no one ever told him. It's okay, he didn't win anyway. His poems and reviews have appeared in places like *Subtropics*, *Colorado Review*, *New South*, *Gulf Coast*, and here.

TJ O'Donnell holds an MFA from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. His work has most recently appeared at *Four Ties Lit Review*, *Fortunates*, *Cirque*, *Banjo Newsletter* and is forthcoming from *Dinosaur Bees* and *Whistling Fire*. When he's not teaching first graders to read, he plays upright bass in a bluegrass band.

Ken Poyner labors by day as an information management specialist; he splits his remaining time between writing, and acting as eye-candy at his wife's power lifting meets. He has published often during

the last 40 years, most recently in *Menacing Hedge*, *Corium*, *Eclectica*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Poet Lore*, and a few dozen other places. He and his wife live in the lower right hand corner of Virginia with five rescue cats and one fierce fish.

Zana Previti was born and raised in New England, and just wrapped up her MFA at the University of California, Irvine. Her most recent fiction can be found in the *New England Review*, *The Master's Review*, and is forthcoming from *Northwind Magazine*. She lives in Oakland, California, and teaches kids about monsters.

Stephen Rosenshein is originally from Seattle and a recent graduate of the MFA in Creative Writing Program at San Francisco State University. Winner of the Mark Linenthal Award and former editor of *Fourteen Hills Literary Magazine*, Stephen's translations and poetry have appeared or are due to appear in *NAP*, *International Poetry Review*, *Emerge*, *Cold Noon* and more.

Patricia Roy is a freelance writer, professor, and poet in the Boston area. Her poetry has appeared in *The Aureorean* and *Goblin Fruit*. She maintains two blogs and tries to be creative with both chef's knife and pen. For balance and sanity, she also loves Zumba, snowshoeing, and howling at the moon.

Elizabeth Helen Spencer graduated from the Creative Writing program at Temple University. In addition to writing fiction her interests include Bikram yoga, animal rescue, and travel. She teaches writing and lives in Philadelphia with her husband and three cats. "The Permanence of Objects" is her first published story.

Mark Spitzer is the author of nineteen books ranging from novels to literary translations to poetry to a study of the ferocious gar fish. In his Bohemian days, Mark was Writer in Residence at the infamous Paris bookstore Shakespeare and Company, but he now lives in Arkansas where he is an associate professor of creative writing and the Editor in Chief of the literary journal *Toad Suck Review*. Check out sptzr.net for more info.

Jeffrey Tucker, a graduate of The Center for writers at The University of Southern Mississippi, teaches creative writing at Hampton University in Virginia. His work has previously appeared in *Inscape*, *Poetry South*, *Tapestry*, *Mason's Road*, and elsewhere. He is currently finding a home for his first full-length collection of poems, *Kill February*.

Vivian Wagner teaches journalism at Muskingum University in New Concord, Ohio. Her essays and articles have appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *The Pinch*, *O: The Oprah Magazine*, *Entrepreneur*, and many other publications, and she is the author of *Fiddle: One Woman, Four Strings*, and *8,000 Miles of Music* (Citadel-Kensington, 2010).

Brandi Wells is Managing Editor of *The Black Warrior Review* and a web editor at *Hobart*. She is the author of *Please Don't Be Upset* (Tiny Hardcore Press) and *Poisonhorse* (Nephew, an imprint of Mudluscious Press). Her writing can be found in *Salamander*, *Mid-American Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Forklift Ohio*, *14 Hills* and many other journals.

Bill Wolak is a poet who has just published his fourth book of poetry entitled *Warming the Mirror* with *The Feral Press*. He is currently working on a

translation of the Italian poet Annelisa Addolorato with Maria Bennett. Mr. Wolak teaches Creative Writing at William Paterson University in New Jersey.

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

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